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THE BIG GUMBO

by

M. JEAN WINTHERS

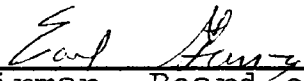
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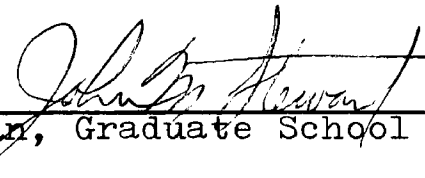
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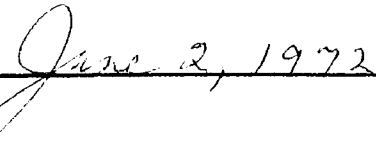
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PLOT SUMMARY

Part I 1890

In the spring of 1890, Raneid and Arne Mortenson, young Norwegian immigrants, arrive in the northwestern part of South Dakota, an area called the 'Big Gumbo, to homestead. They have met Cal Willard, a neighboring rancher, on the train, and he has persuaded them to settle next to him instead of east of the Missouri River where they had originally planned to homestead. Arne loves the freedom of the treeless Gumbo, but Raneid comes to hate it, and Arne refuses to leave or allow her to leave. When Raneid finds she is pregnant, she leaves secretly with Cal, who promises to take her to New York so she can go home to Norway to have her baby. Arne overtakes them at the home of Fred and Sally Williams, the nearest neighbors to the south, and forces Raneid to return to their homestead, where she dies in the spring of puerperal fever, after the birth of her child. Cal, injured in the fight with Arne, leaves too, not returning to the Gumbo until many years later.

Part II 1930-1970

This part begins at the point where Inge, daughter

of Arne and Anna Williams, his second wife, falls in love with Sid Willard, Cal Willard's son, and elope. Arne disowns them, for he has never forgiven Cal, who had returned to the Gumbo and married a rancher's daughter. Eventually, however, he is forced to accept Sid's help in running his ranch, and Sid and Inge inherit it after Arne's death. Part II is told from the viewpoint of Inge and Arne, and tells the story of their life on the ranch in those years; how Inge struggles to curb Sid's wanderlust, raise her five children, survives the death of one of them, has an affair with a hired hand, and lives through prairie fires and droughts. They are finally forced to leave the ranch by the passage of a Government Dam Bill which will inundate the area.

Part III 1970

This is mainly the story of Janna, the youngest of Sid and Inge's children, and is told through her viewpoint. She is the only one still living at home when the ranch is abandoned, and she goes to live with her parents in Benton, the small Gumbo town. Her story culminates the story of the women in the book--Raneid, Inge, and Anna--for she is the only one who is free to choose her own life, and who acts upon these possibilities. Although in love with Stuart Northey, a successful Gumbo sheep rancher, she decides not to marry him,

preferring to follow her career as a writer, for she knows what her life as a rancher's wife will be like-- despite more neighbors, modern conveniences and money, she knows she is no more fitted than Raneid to life on the Gumbo and she escapes successfully.

PART I

ONE

1890

The wagons had long since disappeared from Raneid's view, and she was alone on the prairie, alone with the two hundred sheep, the sky and the wind. She had watched the wagons until their white canvas tops had dipped below the level of the horizon, blowing before the wind like ships at sea. They would wait for her at the watering hole, Cal had assured her. All she need do was keep the wagon track on her left, and not cross it.

The sheep fanned out in front, moving at a steady pace. She had to walk briskly to keep up. The new grass was not plentiful enough to tempt them to graze, and the taste of it only drove them on, looking frantically for more. It would take them awhile to settle down, Fred Williams had told her that morning at dawn, opening the corral gate to let the sheep out, and watching with pride as they streamed through the opening. "They're good sheep though, you won't find

any better anywhere. Just gotta keep up with them the first hour or so. Wish I could lend you a dog, but I need both of mine. Well, good luck to you, Missus," and he had held out his hand.

They had stayed at the Williams' two days, while Arne and Cal and Fred had sorted out the sheep Arne wanted to buy, and Raneid visited with Fred's big, good-natured wife, Sally. The Williams were the first place they had come upon after leaving Pierre two weeks ago, and it would be the last until they reached Cal's homestead, and the land they meant to settle on. Raneid looked back at it as long as she could see it, until the squat log buildings disappeared into the gray-green of the prairie. They would all meet again at shearing time in July, but that was a long time off, it seemed to Raneid.

The sheep were now far ahead of Raneid; the leaders were streaming across the wagon track. Raneid ran after them but by the time she caught up with the stragglers, the whole band was across the track, moving, bunched now, into the unmarked vastness that lay on the other side of the track. Raneid ran until the pain in her side made her stop to catch her breath, but it seemed she was no nearer to them than before. If she lost them! or worse, lost herself in this

terrifying sameness! Each little rise looked like another, she could not see any difference in them. There were no trees, no houses, nothing to mark where she was, or in which direction she was running, except the now vanished wagon track. She ran again, more easily now, her skirts kilted up over her white petticoat, and her shawl trailing by one corner. Now she could see the leaders, bending in an arc back toward her. She screamed at them in Norwegian, and at the sound of her strange voice, they stopped dead, stared, and with that stupid panic Raneid had already come to know, wheeled together, and ran full speed in the opposite direction.

Tears of rage and fatigue ran down Raneid's cheeks. "Fæn skjære," she yelled after them. It was the worst curse she knew, and one that horrified her as she heard herself yelling it out on the clean high wind. The devil would take her, her mother would say if she heard her. A vision of her mother's shocked face rose before Raneid. If she could see her daughter now! Probably she would curse too, Raneid thought, if she had to chase after this bunch of sheep. She had often enough been angry at some old poky milk cow, or stubborn pig, but never this pure rage. Part of it was her fear of losing the sheep, of course, for what was

there to stop them? They could run on forever in one direction.

She set out after them again, slower now, but seeing to her relief that they were already slowing down and spreading out to graze, although still headed in the wrong direction. Having learned by now not to startle them, she crossed the wagon track and skirted the band until she came up to the leaders, and waving her shawl at them she managed to turn them parallel to the track. They accepted the truce; tired now, they were content to graze at a slower pace.

It seemed as if hours had passed since they had set out in the cool dawn, but the sun was still only a little above the horizon. The sky oppressed her, there was so much of it. It seemed to fill the whole world, its light exposing her to the soft May wind. The sod underfoot, though resilient with spring, felt treacherous, as if at any minute she might lose her footing and be spun off into that blue void surrounding her. It was like being adrift on a leaf in the sea, except here one had not even the protection of a leaf to cling to. Even the wagons, which at first she had thought so tenuous a haven, seemed desirable now.

Raneid had been glad to leave Chicago, to start on their journey west. They had stayed over a day and a

night to get some rest after the ocean voyage, and the trip from New York, but neither of them could sleep in the dirty noisy hotel to which they had been directed by the porter in the train station. Holidays with her grandparents in Bergen had not prepared her for the rush and stench and confusion which was all she seemed to see in the American city. No one seemed to have time to answer the requests for directions asked in her slow-voiced English. When at last they had boarded the west-bound train, she was as excited and relieved as Arne.

She began to feel the first intimation of fear when they came into the plains of western Minnesota. Here for miles there was nothing to be seen but endless miles of prairie. Sometimes they passed by a log or frame house, or shacks covered with an ugly black material they learned was tar paper. Whenever the train passed the children would run from their play or work to wave frantically; the farmer would look up from his plow, soothing his frightened horses; but the women would shade their eyes with their hands, and neither smile nor wave, but watch as long as they could see. There was a sense of forlornness about them and the ugly little farms that was very different from the pretty, settled country they had crossed between New York and Chicago. Somehow she had not foreseen how defenseless and naked land looked

without trees. She had never seen prairie before.

The train was filled with settlers heading for Dakota territory, many of them Norwegians; it was almost like being on the boat again. They met Cal Willard not long after the train left Chicago. Arne had got into an argument with the conductor over their tickets. There was some difficulty because of the stopover in Chicago, but neither the conductor nor Arne could understand the other, and Raneid could not make them stop talking long enough to listen to her. Arne was insisting over and over that the tickets were good; the conductor's face was red with indignation as he pointed to the date on the ticket. The whole car watched, interested. Raneid clasped her husband's arm, trying to quiet him.

The tall, dark-haired man dressed in the elegant brown suit, who had been observing the scene from the other end of the car, came up smiling just when it seemed to Raneid that in another minute Arne would begin beating the man over the head, or the conductor would tear up their tickets. At his approach, the conductor's relief was so evident that a collective sigh went through the crowded car. Everything would be all right now.

"Am I glad to see you, Mr. Willard! I'm afraid I'm going to have to learn to speak Norwegian if these Norskies keep coming. I can't make this man understand

that he has the wrong date on his ticket."

"It's not a difficult language, Mr. North," the tall man said. Then in quite good Norwegian, he said to Arne. "Perhaps I can help you. My name is Cal Willard." He put out his hand, and the two men shook hands. "My wife," Arne said awkwardly, and he bowed to her politely. The men were almost the same height, but Arne's width seemed to reduce the other man's height.

"I don't know what is the matter with our ticket," Arne said. "This man keeps pointing at it, and shaking his head. I know the ticket is all right."

"He says that you have the wrong date on it. Today is the 18th and it is marked the 16th," Raneid said suddenly.

Cal Willard looked at her. She was pleased with herself at the astonishment on his face. "But Mrs. Mortenson, if you speak English, why didn't you tell Mr. North what the difficulty was?"

"I was waiting until they stopped that yelling," Raneid said firmly, and the conductor and Arne glanced at each other like schoolboys justly chastised. The conductor handed Arne the tickets, punched in the proper place. "Very good, Madame," he said stiffly, and went on to the next seat, reasserting his authority by snapping the punch spring as loudly as he could.

Raneid could not stop herself; she began to giggle, and in a minute they were all three laughing helplessly together. "Madame," Cal Willard said, "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Raneid seated herself regally on the plush seat. "Won't you join us for lunch? We were just about to eat."

"Thank you, I'd like that," Cal sat down in the seat facing Raneid, while Arne took down the big basket in which she had packed the food they had bought in Chicago. There was bread and cheese, cold sausage, and apples and oranges. Raneid poured the water from the jug into the two cups in the basket and handed one to each of the men.

Willard pulled a pint bottle of bourbon from his inside vest pocket. "Do you mind?" he asked Raneid, and when she shook her head, he poured a little into each of the cups.

"Ah! That washes down that awful bread" Arne said.

"Where are you heading for?" Raneid was aware of Cal's eyes on her above the rim of his cup. She was used to seeing that look in men's eyes; had seen it all her life and had accepted it as any beautiful woman does. What she was not used to was the difference between seeing it in the familiar eyes of men she'd always known and the

impersonal eyes of strangers. She blushed and turned her face to look out the car window, and Cal hastily took a sip from his cup.

"My uncle came back last year from this country," Arne said. "He made a long trip through Minnesota and Wisconsin and Dakota Territory. He said there are miles of prairie there, just waiting for someone to claim it. We leave the train at Pierre."

"And the train leaves us," murmured Cal. "That is the end of the line at the present time. But what a coincidence! I'm on my way back to Pierre myself. I have a claim out on the prairie west of there. I'll be able to show you around. There is indeed land for the taking, especially there, outside of the reservation. But I must warn you, Mr. Mortenson, that it is ranching country, not farming country. And furthermore, it is sheep country, I believe. I have sheep myself, and they fare better than cattle in this part of the country. But if you're thinking of farming, someplace east of the river would perhaps be better. Although much of the good land there is already taken. And of course west of the river there is the reservation."

"I had thought of farming," Arne said slowly. "It's all I know, that and fishing, and I understand they don't have many fish on the prairie! But I don't want

too many close neighbors. That is what we came to get away from, to find freedom and space. And my father did have a small herd of sheep, so I know a little about them."

"Well, you can look around and see what you think," Cal said comfortably. "There is lots of space where I am, let me assure you."

Raneid sat quietly listening to the conversation. When they had first talked of emigrating, she had pictured a little cottage set amid neat green fields, with the tops of neighbors' chimneys visible from the kitchen window; an orchard, with a flower garden beside it, and a stream nearby. What Arne was saying disturbed her. Perhaps he didn't want near neighbors, but she did. Women needed other women to help no matter where they lived. Men could go anywhere, live as independently as they chose, what did they know of women's needs? Women needed other women to borrow from, to gossip with, to sew and sit with children who were sick. And when a woman's time came, what good were men then? It was the women who came in the dark of the night, bringing the soothing drink, the comforting words, the help that made it bearable at all. The man would sit helplessly in the kitchen until he could no longer stand it then go out to spend the night with a neighbor and a bottle.

Many times Raneid had gone with her mother to help at a birth in the village or on one of the outlying farms. When the time came for Raneid to leave for America, her mother had packed into the big carved seaman's chest her father had given her at the time of her own marriage to Raneid's father, a little case containing soft clean linen cloths, a pair of small silver scissors, some linen thread and a tin of dried herb leaves for tea. What good would all that do if there were no neighbors? And what of herself when her time came? Arne was a good farmer, but a woman was not a cow or a ewe.

For the rest of the time it took them to get to Pierre, Cal was with them constantly. He helped Arne with his English, and pointed out passing points of interest to Raneid, and they shared the lavish lunches he always seemed able to provide. Although Arne paid for their meals at the station restaurants it would have seemed rude to them both brought up where visitors were gladly offered the best in the house, to refuse the food he so casually offered during the day. Nor was Arne adverse to sharing the whiskey bottle Cal also provided.

They learned a little about Cal Willard too. His great-grandfather had been one of the early colonists in Pennsylvania, and his father still worked the original

farm. He had learned Norwegian from his grandmother. He had an older sister and a brother who would inherit the family property. As for himself, he had no desire to settle in Pennsylvania. He had traveled in Europe and Africa, and now he was trying his hand at sheep ranching in South Dakota. He still had two years to go toward proving up on his claim, he spent some time traveling, and had been back on a visit to his parents.

Toward the end of the second day, after they entered western Minnesota, the settlements became farther and farther apart. All the next day they traveled on land so flat there was no horizon, just a merging of sky and land. Featureless as the landscape was, Raneid could not keep her eyes from the window. Noticing her preoccupation, Cal kept pointing out the farms in the distance with their green splashes of young trees. "You won't find any trees in the Gumbo," he said enthusiastically, as if this were a virtue, mistaking her horror for interest. No trees, only grass, grass for miles and miles, and maybe a butte to rest your eyes on. Yet it has a beauty of its own. The sunsets and sunrises sometimes are magnificent, and the thunderstorms! You can see them coming for miles, sweeping across the prairie. Half the sky will be dark and raining, while you watch it from the sunshine. I tell you it is something

to see, but it is not safe to stand outside and watch. Lightning will strike the highest object, and it may well be you!

Arne laughed admiringly, but Raneid was sure he was joking. Nothing taller than a man for miles. Here at least, were occasional trees, and sometimes they ran by a small lake or pond, or along a small creek for minutes at a time. Perhaps it would be better to settle here first," Raneid suggested timidly to Arne, but he only laughed at her.

"The best land is already taken, Cal says. No, we must go to the prairies if we want space. I'm beginning to think sheep ranching is the thing to try. What could be more different than fishing, or being a 'lumber-jack'? And didn't we come to try something different?"

Raneid had to agree that they had, but somehow it was not how she had pictured it, when he had first told her about his dream of emigrating, holding her in his arms that warm spring afternoon on the mountainside high above the fjord. She would have gone with him anywhere, of course, after that. Remembering, she flushed with desire, wishing it were night, and they were alone. She put her hand caressingly on his, sliding her fingers along the length of his, and curling her finger tips into the palm of her hand. It was their secret signal.

He closed his hand over hers and squeezed back in reply. They did not look at each other, but looking up, she saw Cal Willard's eyes fixed on their clasped hands.

They had gone on, of course, to the river, the Missouri. West of the river. Raneid began to hate that phrase, and to hope they would never reach the river. But to the river they came, just before sunset that last long day, into the busy, growing town of Pierre, built just ten years before. Raneid, standing on the platform with her shawl about her shoulders, saw evidence of that growth everywhere. The station itself was unpainted, the platform boards already splintering in the sun. A pile of bricks waited beside the platform for some tardy builder; the dust was thick on them; the wide main street stretching away to the west, was rutted from recent rains. Beyond the end of the street, she caught the glint of water which disappeared and then reappeared in a slow curve farther north; the Missouri.

The men were superintending the unloading of their luggage onto the platform, and then into a storage shed. They would take only what they had carried on the train with them to the hotel. Finally all was arranged and they walked down the board sidewalks to the hotel, the biggest building, and the only painted one on the street. It had a verandah in front, and a few chairs;

two men sat smoking there, watching them come up the street, climb the steps, and enter the lobby. Their silent scrutiny embarrassed Raneid, but Cal nodded to them and one of them waved his cigar in reply.

Their room was like the buildings outside, with the shabbiness of haste and cheap materials all too visible. The stained rug on the floor did not cover the cracks in the floor boards; the single window was dusty and the bed lumpy. But after the days on the train it seemed to Raneid a miracle of luxury.

"I think I will take a rest before we eat," she said.

"Perhaps we can take a walk around town then," Cal said to Arne. "I'll find my room, and clean up a bit."

Arne closed the door and looked at Raneid, sitting on the bed, in her chemise, busy with the buttons on her shoes. "Want some help?" He knelt beside the bed and began to undo the buttons. The buttons were small and the loops holding them smaller still; his big fingers laboriously untangled them. Raneid slid her fingers through his thick blond hair. "You should find a barber on your walk," she said. "Maybe I can find some scissors somewhere."

The touch of Arne's hands on her breasts through

the cloth of her chemise made her catch her breath. She heard the change in his breathing too, as he gave up on the buttons and slid his fingers into her neck. Then his hand, firm and warm, enclosed her breast inside her chemise. She pulled his head to her and they kissed.

"Arne, the door."

"I already locked it," Arne pushed her back on the bed, pulling off her unfastened petticoat and pantaloons together. "I didn't think you were that tired."

She held up her arms, and he pulled her dress off over her head. He hopped on one foot, tugging at his trousers. Raneid giggled. In his haste he had forgotten to take off his boots. He looked absurd with his hair sticking out around his face at all angles, and his trousers down around his ankles. Arne looked down and grinned. He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled the boots off, and the trousers inside out, and tossed his shirt on top of them on the floor.

It had been a long time since they had been alone, and for a minute they looked at each other's naked body possessively, touching and murmuring. But Arne could not wait; he rolled onto her and they both gasped with the almost unbearable senuous anguish of body meeting body after long abstaining. Neither of them paid

any attention to the alarming racket of the bed springs and the sounds of people passing in the hall outside. They were half asleep when the knock came on the door.

"Ready, Arne?"

"I'll meet you downstairs in ten minutes," Arne answered in a voice so unmistakably languid that Raneid blushed. Then she pulled the sheet over her and went to sleep.

The sheep were grazing well now, moving forward at a steady pace. Raneid saw that her shadow was almost due north; it must be almost noon. Half an hour later she saw the white canvas tops of the wagons blossoming ahead of her. The sheep saw them too, or rather, smelled the water, and quickened their pace, falling one behind the other, heads down, they moved in a straight line along the wagon trail.

TWO

She had labored all day with the men under the rough woolen blanket of August heat, relieved only by the ever-constant wind, which only made more unbearable the acid agony of flying ants on a sweating back, or a hay seed beneath a sun-dried eyelid. The hay which had been cut and raked into piles the week before, had to be loaded onto the wagon, hauled the rough mile to the

hay yard next to the barn and stacked.

Raneid tromped the hay into the wagon which Arne and Cal threw up to her. From her perch she could see the sheep along the river begin to fan out of the groups where they had stood, heads in each other's shade, all day. Languid still with the heat, they moved slowly, grazing as they walked. From here, too, she could see the stove-pipe of Cal's house, not visible from her own window. There was nothing else to be seen anywhere, though she spun in a slow circle, searching as always for something to rest her eyes on. Surely they would have other neighbors someday. Neighbors with families and women and children.

The men were walking to the next hay pile, more briskly now, looking to the west, where a black cloud had suddenly boiled up above the horizon. Almost a quarter of the hay piles remained, but Raneid knew they would keep on until all the hay was in. Especially if Arne thought it looked like rain. Sighing, she joggled the reins, tied to the upright of the hay rack, and the horses, slumped dozing in the harnesses, left hoofs cocked in the same identical way, straightened and plodded resignedly after the men. Arne turned and waved impatiently; she gave the reins a slap on the sweat-wet backs, but the horses did not break their sleepwalker's

amble. Arne strode back and grabbed the near horse's rein near the bit, jerking it along.

Raneid took off her sunbonnet and wiped her sweaty neck with it. She itched all over with the hay dust beneath the long-sleeved shirt and trousers she had made from an old pair of Arne's. Still the hay scratched her hands and ankles above the leather boots. At home she had gone barefoot most of the summer, but here the hard hot earth hurt her feet and cactuses leaped out and stung cruelly, their spines almost impossible to remove and festering painfully if left. Sometimes one came flying up with the hay and Raneid would throw it, holding it by one spine, back over the edge of the rack.

Bending her head before the one-eyed god, she put her sunbonnet back on. Cal had insisted she wear a sunbonnet and Arne a hat until they were used to the sun, but she knew better than he what would happen under Odin's eye, out here on this land which belonged to him. God did not live here. Raneid did not find this hard to understand, having always preferred Snurri to the Bible. She had not believed in God since she was a small child and made her own rules. Still, she had always enjoyed church on Sundays . . . her parents so proud of their pretty child, in the lovely blue full

skirt she always wore, and the fjord calm under the summer sun, for Sundays were always summer.

"Raneid! Hurry, there is a storm coming."

They were waiting for her again. The horses began to move at the sound of Arne's voice, and Raneid clung to the shaking upright in a trance of weariness. She wanted it to rain, rain so hard it would stop the haying, soak the garden so she wouldn't have to carry water to it again tonight, drench her and fill her inside out with warm pure water. She would run naked in the rain, washing her hair, as she used to do in the secret pool under the waterfall where she and Arne had swum all their lives together, innocently naked as children, less innocently, but still naked, as they grew up. She had washed the soap from her hair under the waterfall, gasping from the almost unendurable cold shock of it, delaying the exquisite moment when she could crawl out on the sun-warm rocks beside Arne and spread her hair to dry.

Tears of longing ran out of the corners of her eyes, mingling with the dusty runnels of sweat. She had been dirty for days. Her hair was dirty as soon as she stepped into the sun, the dust and wind, although she had just washed it in the alkaline water from the well. Her fingers left smudges on her white waists,

the collars of all their clothes were rimmed with sweat, dirt which she could not scrub out. She remembered Sally Williams, sitting on a chair cleaning dirt from between her toes before she went back to kneading bread. Sally did not care if her collars were grimy, and she, too, would not care in time.

The hay came flying up. They did not look to see where she was, but pitched the hay in a frenzy. Raneid moved it around with her fork, filling in the corners of the rack to keep the load even.

"Not much more now, Raneid," Cal called up encouragingly. She smiled down at him over the edge of hay. He was tanned to an oiled-leather color. It went very well with his white teeth and dark hair. She wondered why she didn't think him handsome, but then she had always liked blond men. Cal looked like one of her brothers.

At last they were creaking back to the hay yard with the wagon piled as high as they dared. The men walked beside the horses, but Raneid stood sunk in the breathless hay to her waist, holding on to the upright, willing the black cloud into tumidity. It seemed to be veering to the north, and Raneid willed it back again on course.

"Do we need Raneid this trip?" Cal asked after

they had unloaded the hay. "There's only one load left."

Arne glanced at the cloud. "It goes faster with someone tromping. Ran's used to this work," he said reprovingly to Cal. "After all, she is raised on a farm."

"I'm not tired," Raneid said, and Arne grinned proudly at Cal. Her own tiredness dismayed her. She had always worked with the men at home and was proud of her endurance. Perhaps they had spared her more than she had realized, sending her after the lunch in the morning and afternoon, letting her ride the horse to the barn, and always excusing her on hot days to swim, knowing how necessary water was to her, even joining her sometimes, for with five of them working, not even haying took long, and her father, being prosperous, was inclined to indulge his children.

Arne was never tired. His father had been neither indulgent, prosperous nor prolific and Arne had worked every day of his life, allowing a little time during the day for school, from before dark, until long after. He had not waited long to escape the rocky mountain farm; he had joined the fishing fleet on their annual trip to the Lofoten islands when he was barely twelve, and every year after he had fished during

the season and farmed during the summer. No, he was never tired, and especially here, here on his own treeless, rockless land. He looked like some Viking god of the prairie, she thought, with his blond hair sticking out from under the felt hat in dusty ringlets, plastered in sweat to his forehead. Hair glinted golden on his chin where he had not shaved, curled in a golden mat on his arms, and through the open neck of his shirt. Holding aloft his pitchfork like a battle-ax, he jumped into the back of the hayrack, and put his arm around Raneid, slapping the horses with the reins. "Av vei, Cal. Yump!" and despite her fatigue, Raneid laughed as Cal scrambled hurriedly into the back, and the horses jumped forward, their ears pricked forward and alert.

"Ro, Ro, Krabbeskjaer," he sang loudly, and Raneid sang too, leaning her head against his sweaty shoulder, and Cal joined in the chorus, holding down the jouncing pitchforks with his foot.

The storm broke as they headed for home with the last of the hay piled too high on the rack. Halfway there the sheep caught up with them, streaming in long swift lines for the bedground; the horses humped their backs against the pelting rain and laid their ears back. The men walked bareheaded, the water running in dirty streams down their necks. Raneid, walking with them, took off

her sunbonnet, and undid the braids wound around her head, and forgetting her aching back ran ahead of the horses, lifting the hair off her neck so the rain could soak it thoroughly.

The flash of lightning stopped them instantly in mid-motion, Raneid, half-turned, saw the men with open mouths, uplifted faces, the horses' eyes glaring white rolled at the sky. Tor leaped forward violently, dragging Torlander along with him, goaded by the mighty hammer blow of thunder from above and Raneid's scream. The rein was dragged from Cal's hand, and he grabbed for it again, missed and sprinted off after the runaway team.

Raneid, scrambling out of the way of the horses, ran back toward Arne, but he did not see her. Screaming curses in Norwegian, he ran past her, waving his pitchfork in one hand, his hat in the other. Raneid, left alone, drew her hair under her chin and trembled. She was afraid to move, lest the hammer strike her dead. But she could not stay, she must find a place to hide. She began to run again, following the wagon track. The hoof marks of the horses and the wheel ruts were already filling with water. She came up on the last of the sheep scattered to either side by the wagon, and went on with them, feeling safe in their midst. Each time the

lightning flashed and the thunder rolled, the sheep would surge forward, blatting loudly, a tone of almost human terror in the sound. Raneid surged with them, her terror an echo of theirs.

The herd began to slow down, and find its leaders, dropping into line behind them. They had already forgotten the storm; now all they wanted was to reach the safety of the bedground.

Raneid saw the wagon careening off the track ahead of the sheep, the horses plunging like swimmers in a straight line toward the outline of the barn, dimly outlined through the rain. Suddenly horses and wagon disappeared over a cut bank, the wagon poised for an instant on its edge, then slid over on its side, its load of hay slowly spilling out as it went over. Seemingly without pause the horses appeared, still running side by side toward the barn; the broken harness trailing after them. Raneid went with the sheep, taking the trail the horses had followed. Over the edge of the bank they streamed, not swerving to avoid the spilled hay but trampling over what lay in their path. Arne and Cal had reached the wreck and were checking the wagon to see what damage had been done.

"The tongue is broken," Cal said pointing to the pole which served as a tongue, lying oddly twisted like

a broken leg, with the harness strap canted from its end. "Well, that can be fixed."

Arne looked up and saw Raneid among the sheep. "Stupenagel! Screaming at thunder! We have no storms in Norway?" He threw his hat onto the hay and speared it through with the pitchfork.

Raneid did not answer. Turning away, she followed the sheep to the bedground, past it and through the open corral gate to huddle into the open sided sheep shed; then she ran through the rain and lightning to the house, where she wrapped a towel around her wet hair, dropped her wet muddy clothes into a heap on the floor, and crawled naked into the bed, pulling the covers over her head.

When she awoke she saw that the light in the room had dimmed into twilight. The pillow was damp under her cheek from her hair; the towel had slipped down and the top of her head was cold. She could smell something frying in the kitchen, and reluctantly she turned over, fully awake now and remembering why she did not want to wake up. Arne was angry with her; she could not bear to have him angry, and it had been her fault too. What had possessed her to scream like that? She had always loved storms at home. Lightning had never frightened her. She had watched it many times,

racing across the sky behind some mountain peak. But here the sky was too close, the storm had seemed to surround her in personal enmity.

Another sizzle, and clinking of dishes. Guiltily she threw back the covers and took the loose dress she wore around the house from its peg on the wall, not bothering with chemise or drawers. It took some time however, to get the knots out of her tangled, still-damp hair. At last she had it brushed smooth and hanging shining almost to her waist in back. She did not braid it. Arne loved it loose and she knew the effect it would have on him. She looked into the wavy mirror hung on the wall, that had hung on her wall at home since she was a child. In the dim light her eyes looked almost purple instead of blue in the golden tan of her face. She knew she was beautiful, and she enjoyed it as she enjoyed any other beautiful thing. A beautiful object was more to be prized than an ugly one. Even as a child she could not bear the sight of anything ill-made or unsightly. When her dolls had grown shabby she had wrapped them in oilcloth and given them a sailor's burial in the fjord.

Arne was frying potatoes in the black iron skillet on top of the range. The room was very warm, although he had built only a small fire, and all the windows and

the door were open. The table was set for two, but haphazardly, with the fork and knife on the left side and no napkins. He glanced at her as she came in, then down at the smoking pan, frowning and turning the contents about with the fork. He had washed and taken off the sweat-stained shirt, and his blond hair curled fine and silky from the rain.

She had seen immediately that he was no longer angry. It never lasted long with Arne. She went up to him and put her arm around his waist, feeling the smooth hard flesh over his ribs, and gave him a little poke. He lifted a mass of potatoes and flopped them back into the grease, which splattered over the stove top, sending up little spirals of smoke. His arms were brown to just above the elbows, to where he had rolled his shirt sleeves, the sharp line between brown and white softened by an irregular line of sunburn. His shoulder was very white and smooth. Raneid rubbed her nose against it, and licked him with her tongue like a cat, tasting the salty male taste. "Arne . . ."

He put the fork back into the potatoes, and turning to her, ran his fingers through the hair down her back. The strands caught in the rough skin of his palm where callouses had grown thick. He pulled her head back by her hair, and slid his other hand over the

thin cotton of her loose shift, down the curve of her waist, over her flank. She pressed against him, feeling him harden into her belly, pulling him down with both arms around her neck until their faces met. She felt the stubble on his chin against her cheek. She opened her eyes as they kissed. His stubby lashes had no color seen so close; out of the corner of her eye she saw the smoke rising from the pan, and as Arne swung her up in his arms, she reached behind his back and shoved the pan to the back of the stove.

THREE

Cal stayed in Arne's barn until the worst of the storm had passed, helping Arne untangle the harness and soothe the frightened horses. Two of the harness lines had broken in the wild dash to the barn where the horses had stepped on them. They would have to be recovered and riveted again; there were no others. Arne carefully dried the harness with a gunny sack as he hung it up on the pegs, cursing in a steady stream of English now. He had already discovered, thought Cal, that English is a more versatile language than Norwegian for swearing. It was what they all seemed to pick up first.

They did not mention Raneid. Arne did not lose his temper easily, and Cal had never before seen him even

raise his voice to his wife. She had helped set the horses off, but perhaps Arne had not seen the look of terror on her face as that first bolt had paralyzed them all in its white brilliance. He remembered how she had laughed at him, disbelievingly, when he had described the thunder storms to her on the train. She had not expected such fury, he knew. And then exhausted from working all day under that sun . . . she was not as strong as Arne thought. Nor was he, he thought wryly, standing up and stretching his aching muscles. It was time to go home.

Looking back as he rode out of the yard, he saw Arne standing in the yard, his face raised to the rain, like some thirsty plant blindly drinking in the rain. The thunder muttered away to the south, and the sky was lightening in the west. Underneath the ground sucked at his horse's hoofs; every burn-out was a pool of water. He stayed on the grass out of the trail he had worn over the months from his house to the Mortenson's. Even so he had to stop before he was half-way home to clean the balled-up clay from Jubal's hoofs.

He was drenched to the skin but he did not hurry. He had not been so clean in days. Jubal enjoyed it too; she tossed her head and pranced as best she could in the steadily thickening mud, snorting at the sucking

sound her retracting feet made. They would make it up of course, Raneid and Arne. He could not forget how she had looked, plodding home among the sheep, the absurd trousers dragging wet and muddy around her ankles and her long hair clinging to the curves of her breasts, the terror replaced by a look of blind survival, the look of a child, or the sheep themselves, abandoned by their protectors, instinct driving them to cover. That fool of an Arne had not even looked at her, and he had had to turn his back so that he would not go to her and lead her to safety. Remembering, he was angry again at Arne. More worried about the damn load of hay than his own wife.

He had noticed them right after they left Chicago. Most of the people in the car seemed to know them; when they walked down the aisle heads would turn in their wake, smiling. Arne and Raneid would smile back, murmuring, but the next instant their eyes would turn to each other. It was Raneid he saw first. He had not expected to see beauty here, in this crowd of weary crumpled immigrants, and he looked astonished, and kept looking, sure that he would find it was not so, that another light, or closer scrutiny would reveal her as ugly. She wore a green fitted dress with the suggestion of bustle, that he knew, from his recent trip home, was

now the fashion. Her white skin, the dark hair and the unusual blue of her eyes he saw in one quick upward glance as she passed. It was only later he noticed Arne.

Arne was not handsome, he thought then, but he was the perfect background for his wife, as rough granite is for an alpine flower. The square planes of his long Norwegian face emphasized the fragility of hers; her smooth darkness was more vivid in contrast with his curly blondness. He saw at once that they were an unusual couple, and he made their acquaintance at the first opportunity. Arne was what he appeared, a young farm lad setting off on the great adventure of his life to find land in America. Cal did not mistake his straightforwardness for simplicity, but he was almost alarmed with the speed with which Arne decided to homestead on the Gumbo after a day of listening to Cal's stories, and even more alarmed when he did not swerve from this decision in the days that followed. He did not consult his wife. She would go where he went.

Arne seemed to miss, as Cal did not, Raneid's anxious questions about neighbors, and towns, and her incredulous silences when he told of the vast distances between settlements, and the scarcity of neighbors. She had not wanted to believe him. By the end of that

journey he knew they were going in the wrong direction. Caught in a last minute attack of conscience, he tried to persuade Arne to settle east of the river until he could see what the Gumbo was like. But there was no changing Arne's mind now. They would go west.

He had forgotten his misgivings on the trip out from Pierre. The Gumbo is at its best in the spring, and Raneid had delighted in the little spring wild flowers and the hidden nests of meadowlarks she discovered. He found himself watching for rabbits and antelope to point out to her. Once they sat for two hours over lunch, watching a band of antelope with several enchanting young, graze unafraid not a quarter of a mile from them. She had not wanted to eat the young buck he had killed for food but had anyway, seeing she was displeasing her husband with her squeamishness. She had been happy at the Williamses, hiding very well, he thought, her fastidiousness at Sally's housekeeping, and the dirty children, and seeing quite rightly Sally's warm heart. But when they reached the homestead and Arne had looked about him, taken his bearings, and said firmly, "Here is where we will build," she had looked stricken, glancing at Cal in panic. "But there's nothing here," she said.

He had the oldest Williams boy who stayed on the range in a sheepwagon all summer with his sheep so he

was free to spend his time helping Arne. But as much as he did, Arne did more. They accomplished in three months what it would have taken another man twice as long. By the middle of August, when they started the haying, the house and sheepshed, and the small horse and cowbarn were finished. It was as much as he had on his own homestead, and much tidier too. Arne was a craftsman in building, he had learned this as a boy working with his father. The cottonwood logs were not smooth and straight as were the pines in Norway, but Arne squared them with his ax, and beautifully notched and fitted together, chinked with gumbo mud, their silver-grey blended solidly into the earth, in a way that Cal's and the Williamses ill-built cabins did not.

Arne was ten years younger than Cal, but at thirty he learned many things from Arne. Arne's big square tipped fingers could fix anything, build anything. He was a born rancher; what he did not have he invented, and in those three months he was more at home on the prairie than Cal would ever be. He taught Cal by the example of his own determination that he, Cal, would never be a rancher, something he had been suspecting for some time. Cal, by nature indolent, found such determination tiring, although he knew nothing less would succeed. It was important to Arne that the sheepshed

face south and the corrals be arranged to receive protection from the east and the cowbarn from the west. Once done, Cal saw immediately how practical it was and marvelled that he had not thought of it himself. He had been raised on a farm too.

On his visit home Cal had hinted to his brother and father that he was growing a little tired of ranch-life. He told them of the loneliness, the hardships of a country they could not begin to imagine. His brother had given him a lecture on the joys of married life, children, etc. and his sister and mother had begun a campaign to reintroduce him to young ladies he had known since childhood. There were plenty of young ladies and eager mothers--he was after all most eligible for he was well off, having inherited his grandmother's fortune, (his brother got the farm), fairly good looking, all the qualities any girl would require in any husband. They were eager enough; he was not. He could not imagine any of the elegant, mannered young women he knew running after sheep on the Gumbo. He took them buggy riding, and kissed a few discretely, and left before he became too involved. He was not ready to settle down yet.

When he met the young immigrant couple on the train it had seemed a good idea to encourage them to join him as neighbors. Arne had been so eager for

advice, and he had enjoyed playing the part of bountiful land owner. It was only later that he doubted his intentions, when he found himself thinking too often of Raneid. His new neighbors filled a void of loneliness in him he had not acknowledged fully, even to himself. But it was Raneid who filled it most.

Cal had always liked women, especially beautiful women. He loved the smell and shine of their hair, the combination of brown eyes and blond hair, dark and light, or blue and black. The softness of their upper arms, the curve of breast and waist aroused in him more tenderness than lust. As objective as an artist he studied the planes of their faces, the arrangement of eye to eyebrow, the tilt or straightness of their noses, the circumference and length of neck and the set of head upon it. He liked to see beauty in a man too, but despite several rather embarrassing incidents in his travels, one specifically in Italy, he did not confuse his admiration of male beauty with sex, as he did with women. The trouble now was that he was no longer objective. He saw a real person behind Raneid's beautiful face, one that he liked, and in a way felt responsible for. He had allowed himself to become too familiar with them. He had lost his detachment. Well he had been going to leave in the fall anyway. He would delay it

until next spring. They would need help over the winter. Perhaps he could sell his claim to Arne--it would take him years to pay of course, but that wouldn't matter. Perhaps he would join that expedition to the Yukon that he had heard about in Chicago. He would think about it during the winter, the expedition would leave sometime in the spring, May or June. He had taken the precaution of writing down the leader's name, a Lieut. Frederick Schwatka. There was said to be talk of gold in Alaska territory and already gold had been discovered in Canadian territory. Yes, that would be interesting.

Jubal tossed her head impatiently, and shifted from one side to another. Cal realized he had been staring at the river for some time without seeing it. The water rushed gray and muddy, bankful between its narrow banks. It always amazed him that it could fill so quickly and as quickly subside. The rain had come just in time on the verge of drought as it always did. There would be enough water now until the fall rains. Lifting his hand he flicked Jubal lightly with the reins, and she stepped snorting into the swift water of the ford.

FOUR

The rain finished the haying. There was not

enough put up to feed the sheep through the winter of course; they would have to depend on grazing. The prairie grass cured as it dried on its stems, there was no need really to harvest it except for the milk cow and the horses kept in. The wind kept the snow off enough for the sheep to graze, Cal assured them; in the four winters he had spend on the Gumbo the snow had not been heavy enough to prevent the sheep's grazing. It was one of the advantages to raising stock on the prairie.

Now, at summer's end, the tempo of life slowed for a time in the sunny September weather. The hay in, and the necessary building done, even Arne stopped working and spent the days with Raneid, following the sheep in their timeless ritual. Cal sent Tommie home for a month and herded his own sheep. Raneid and Arne glimpsed him from time to time following the sheep with a book in his hand. Raneid was happy; she had Arne to herself again. She hurried through her household tasks each morning so she could take the mid-morning meal, as well as lunch, out to him. She would make something he especially liked, lefsi, perhaps, still warm from the stove, made with the leftover mashed potatoes, spread with butter and a little sugar, and rolled into a tube. Or maybe there would be a cheese newly ripened to eat with a thin flat sheet of flatbrød just baked on top of

the stove.

They would eat their lunch seated on the edge of a water hole, and sometimes afterwards Raneid would play her guitar and sing love songs in Norwegian, or one of the many folk songs she loved. Or sometimes Arne would unplait her hair, twining into it the little yellow daisies that grew everywhere on the gumbo, and they would make love lazily in the sun, using their clothes as a blanket and watched only by the curious eyes of Oskar, the shepherd pup Fred Williams had given them, and which Arne was trying to train to hand and arm signals.

One day, as they often did after lovemaking, they decided to swim in the one hole that was deep enough to allow them to swim a few strokes. The banks were too steep for the sheep to get to the water, and so it was cleaner than most of the other water holes. It was late afternoon, but the sheep were still clustered around the water holes farther downstream, standing in little groups, their heads in each other's shade. Raneid and Arne did not look in the direction of Cal's house, or they might have seen him coming toward them, over the top of the little rise which hid his house from theirs. He had been on his way over to see them, keeping between the two bands of sheep where their grazing circles had

swung and almost touched. He had left his horse at home that day, not intending to go far, and book in hand, the dog lolling at his heels, he had been about to shout at them, seeing them stretched in the grass, when they rose and started away from him.

Cal stopped with his mouth still open for his shout, for they were both naked. Not only naked, but it was immediately obvious to Cal what they had been doing in the languid way Raneid shook her tangled hair down her back, the little yellow flowers tumbling from it; the way Arne stretched and yawned with his arms above his head. As unconcernedly as Adam and Eve must have been before the apple, they strolled to the edge of the water hole and disappeared over the edge. Cal shut his mouth and dropped to the ground, his first thought that they might turn and see him. The dog dropped panting beside him and closed its eyes, glad of the rest.

Cal, flushed to the ears, pressed himself into the grass, trembling with laughter. He was shocked and in a strange way, troubled. He had never before seen a man and women strolling naked in the bright sunlight or anywhere else for that matter.

Cal considered himself a worldly man, and was well aware that he was considered shocking and slightly

scandalous in the circle of his parents and their friends. He had indeed enjoyed outraging their staid sensibilities many times with tales of his travels in Africa where the women would go about half-clothed. Still, he knew they considered these to be women of an outlandish race who might be expected to do strange and immoral things.

What would they say if he were to tell them he had seen his neighbors, people as white as themselves, civilized and intelligent, cavorting about the prairie in broad daylight without a stitch on? Not even babies who could barely toddle were allowed to do that. If Tommie, for instance, had been herding sheep that day instead of he . . . what a tale he would have to tell his family, and no doubt about their reaction either. Even in this rough land the lines were drawn thick and black. America was not a land where nakedness, for whatever reason, was condoned.

They would learn that all too soon, he supposed, and of course, most likely knew it already. After all, they did not know he was spying on them. But what would teach them would be the land itself. It was not a land kind to fragile human skin. Cactuses would tear their feet, the sun burn their white bodies, the harsh wind roughen and dry them. They would learn to protect themselves soon enough with clothes. Naked they were

too vulnerable. Nakedness requires trees, for protection from sun and wind, and damp soil, and running water, flowers to smell and soft grass to lie on.

He could not leave without the risk of being seen, so he made himself as low in the grass as possible, and focused on the place where they had disappeared, for the water itself could not be seen; the hole was sunk into the prairie. Only the line of rough green slough grass at the lower end marked the place where the water submerged to surface muddily farther down. He heard them shouting and laughing, the sound of water splashing. Arne rose suddenly out of the prairie like some golden god of the Gumbo, visible to his waist, then up came Raneid at the other end, among the green slough grass, her wet hair coiled like snakes on her back, her hands sending water splashing vigorously toward Arne. Arne splashed back and Oskar the pup leaped barking and springing foolishly on his front legs along the edge. They began to coax him into the water. Whining with desire to please and fear of the water, he backed off, gave a great leap, and disappeared from view between them. "Good boy, good boy," Arne encouraged him, and lifting up the dripping dog, put him safely back on the bank.

The sheep were beginning to stir now and venture

out of the shade of each other's bodies to graze. The wind, which had dropped for a little during the afternoon, quickened, bringing a tinge of coolness, reminding Cal that it was September, after all. The swimmers felt it too, and came out of the water to dry in the wind. Raneid sat on her clothes, combing and plaiting her hair. Ashamed of himself, yet unable to look away, he watched Raneid dress, seeing tantalizing glimpses of breast and hip softened by distance and quickly hidden as she donned skirt and waist. She did not wear much underneath he noticed, only pantaloons, and something on top which must be a chemise.

Cal waited until they were safely on their way, then he rose and started home to fix his bachelor dinner. He felt depressed and lonely, and vaguely lustful. What he had seen made him realize the gap between himself and his neighbors. They were foreigners, with different customs and habits, and he envied them each other. Cal had heard many people talk about the "loose morals" of the immigrants, but he did not confuse what he had seen with any such ambiguous term. Freedom was a better word, and he grieved for those two who would soon enough lose that freedom in exchange for the hypercritical conventions of another culture. It was too bad it didn't work the other way and they could loosen up a few of

the people he knew. He could not imagine any of his prudish sisters, for instance, acting as Raneid had done; it seemed to him a rare and wonderful thing. Raneid was of course an unusual person. He had seen that from the first. He did not suppose her typical of the young female immigrant. Somehow a combination of a liberal, intelligent family in which she had been allowed much freedom, her own intelligence and education, talent, and most of all her beauty, which alone made her special and conferred upon her privileges, insulating her from ordinary women, had made her a unique person with rules of her own.

And all that, Cal thought, would be wasted here, with no one but he and Arne to appreciate it. In the end she would not be the wife Arne needed. Beauty and talent and sensitivity were superfluous in the Gumbo; what was needed was strength and a stoical will to endure. It was what Arne had and he knew he and Raneid lacked. All summer he had felt increasingly, with that special subtlety of his to women's feelings, that Raneid hated the prairie as much as Arne loved it. He had come to realize her need of people, other women, and the beauty of nature that for her did not exist in the Gumbo. She had seemed happy enough today, it is true, but he could not forget her face in the summer storm,

lost and blind in terror.

He had reached his corral fence, and was leaning upon it. It was made of poles he had cut from young pines along the Belle Fourche River. The bark had peeled off long ago and the wood was cracked and dried. The sun, low in the west, illuminated starkly the little cabin. He hadn't really looked at it a long time. God, it was ugly! Holes gaped here and there between the logs where the gumbo mud chinking had fallen out. It would have to be rechinked before winter. One end had settled, and the roof sagged on that side. If he rode off and left it, the Gumbo would soon reclaim it. In a year or two there would be nothing but a tumble of logs to mark the spot.

All the vague discontent that had simmered within him the past year suddenly crystalized. Yes, he must leave. If it weren't for the Mortensons he would take his sheep over to Williamses tomorrow, and catch the next train east. But he had brought them here, out of his loneliness. He was responsible for them, responsible for Raneid. For her sake, he must persuade Arne to homestead somewhere else. It was not too late. The hardest thing would be admitting to Arne that he had been wrong in urging them to come, and harder still to say why, that he did not think Raneid could live here.

And how would Arne react to all this, another man telling him about his wife? Would he believe him? Cal had come, during the summer, to amazement and awe at Arne's strength of will, stubbornness, even. If he refused to see it, he would never change his mind.

If he did not feel himself so right about Raneid, he would leave them to their own affairs. Arne was certainly capable enough. But he must try, for Raneid's sake. In any case, he must go to Belle Fourche after supplies for the winter, both he and Arne if they were to exist through the winter. A winter here might change Arne's mind, at that. He had no idea how bleak and lonely and boring they could be. In the spring he might be more than willing to leave.

He could see Jubal and Yellow Bird watching him from the horse pasture. They were waiting for water, and he went now and worked the iron handle of the pump up and down, watching the cold clear water spew out of the pump mouth into the wooden trough. The horses came eagerly and thrust their muzzles into the part of the trough which stuck through the barbed wire fence. The rest of the trough was outside the fence for the sheep. He had sworn after last winter to get a windmill. He had almost lamed his arm pumping water for the sheep after the water holes had frozen. Sheep could exist

without water for several days, eating snow with their grass, but they had to have water once in awhile. He would have to remind Arne about a pump for his well, in case it was a hard winter and the springs froze. He pumped a bucketful to take into the house, and went to eat his supper of canned tomatoes and a hunk of Raneid's bread. It was too hot to start a fire.

Arne and Raneid were the perfect picture of contented pioneer man and woman the next evening when he and Yellow Bird came up the trail to their house. They were sitting on the door step in the early twilight, Raneid with her guitar. They were both singing something in Norwegian. He heard the soft liquid sounds of the guitar before he saw them, the sound intensely pure in the still air. Yellow Bird pricked her ears and stepped softly, and they did not see him until he was at the hitching post. Raneid, seeing him, strummed the last chord, and smiled up at him.

"Don't stop," Cal said. "Sing me a song, please."

Raneid did not hesitate. She knew he loved to hear her play. In a minute they were all singing loudly in English a song they had learned on the train,

"They give you land for nothing in jolly Oleana,
And grain comes leaping from the ground in floods
of golden manna,
And ale as strong and sweet as the best you've
ever tasted.

Is running in the foamy creek where most of it
is wasted.

And little roasted piggies with manners quite
demure, Sir
They ask you will you have some ham?
And then,
You say, why sure, Sir!"

"Well, Sir, how about some coffee, Sir, seeing
as we're out of ale, Sir?" sang Raneid, ending with a
dashing run of chords.

"Why sure, madame," Cal sang back, and they all
laughed at the way he failed to fit the words to the
melody. "No, I'll get it . . . sit still, Raneid, and
sing some more." But Raneid was already going through
the door, with a teasing look for Cal. He knew his
attempts at gallantry amused her. It was women's work
to wait on the men, she had told him mockingly, but he
knew she liked it too.

Raneid brought the pot of coffee drained off
from the boiler always kept on the stove, Norwegian
fashion, full of coffee, to which new grounds were
added each day. It was still hot from the supper fire,
and she poured a mug for Cal, and refilled Arne's mug,
then seated herself demurely on the lower step below
the two men. Cal's knee was very close to her shoulder,
and in the dim light he could see the smoothness
of her braids, wound around her head, and a tendril of
hair that lay against her white ear. Tonight she wore a

white cotton waist, with a homespun skirt, of a deep blue and a pattern she had said her village was known for. Her neck was tanned despite the sunbonnet; inside the collar he could see a thin red line of sunburn. She looked rested and happy, with no trace of the fear and panic he had seen the day of the storm. Perhaps it had just been the sun, after all.

"I think it's about time to stock up for the winter," he said to Arne. "I thought I might go to Belle Fourche day after tomorrow, if that's all right with you. We may as well go together. It's almost the first of October, and the weather isn't dependable much beyond the 10th. Once the rains start we won't be able to get out till it snows and we don't want to be traveling in winter if we don't have to."

"Yah, we have been talking of it," Arne said in his slow careful English, which he always used with Cal, in order to improve his own. Cal on the other hand, often spoke Norwegian to Arne, so their conversation was a curious blend of both languages, with Raneid speaking whatever suited her at the moment.

"We need many things," Arne went on. "More potatoes, too, they don't grow here very well . . . the flour is almost gone," he sighed. "I think we will need four wagons to bring it back, Cal."

"I will have extra room in mine. We might be able to get some more coal in too. Probably have enough for the winter now though. Good thing Belle Fourche is only a good day's drive. If we had to go as far as Pierre, now, we would need a caravan." None of them had been to town since the Mortensons had come from Pierre in May with Cal. Fred Williams had offered to take the wool clip to Pierre with him, since it was necessary still to sell the wool there where the railroad reached. There was talk of the Milwaukee extending its line from the south up through Dakota territory to Belle Fourche. When it did it would bring more settlers with it, Cal said now as they talked of the railroad, but it was doubtful if this country would ever be densely settled. There was still land, he had heard, east of the river, or farther north, better farming country and more settled, if a man wanted. Cal could feel Raneid tense through the few inches which separated them. She glanced at Arne. "Maybe" she said timidly, "if there will never be more people than this, Arne. It would be nice to live where there were people and trees."

Arne snorted incredulously. "We're not even settled yet, and you're talking of moving! For sure there will be more people. We came didn't we? Who wants people anyway? Here I am my own boss, with no one

looking over my shoulder. Someday we may own all this land, Raneid, thousands of sheep! And no farming! Sheep need a lot of range, isn't that so Cal?"

Cal nodded, but Raneid turned her face away and said nothing. Cal knew he had been right. Well, he had planted the idea, maybe on the way to town he could talk some more to Arne. Raneid picked up her guitar and played a melody softly; Cal recognized one of the Grieg folktunes.

"You had better put down a pump on your list for that well," Cal told Arne. "I doubt if that spring holds out." He paused. There were so many things they needed he didn't know where to start, and their money wouldn't go that far, he was sure.

Arne pulled a paper from his shirt pocket and a lead to write with. "We've been making a list, Raneid and I," he said. "You must tell us what we will need, and the English names--some of those we don't know." Raneid brought a candle and they sat for a long time, going over the list together, to the low accompaniment of the guitar. Raneid said little. She had listed the food they would need, and the amounts in Norwegian. Now with Cal's help, Arne translated the amounts in pounds, measures, barrels. It did not seem possible they would need 300 pounds of flour for instance, or 100

pounds of sugar, but Cal said they would use that or more.

At last Cal stood up to leave. "I'll be by Wednesday morning early," he said. "I can bring your team by tomorrow, with mine. I saw them five miles or so east yesterday." The teams had been turned out to graze after the haying, to save Cal's small horse pasture, the only fenced enclosure either of them had. That was another thing, the wire--but it was too late and he had a whole day with Arne to talk about wire.

"I will be ready," Arne stood up. "There is nothing here that Raneid can't do. The cow to milk and the sheep to watch; you can manage that fine, Raneid."

Cal looked at Raneid, holding the candle, and saw the sudden look of disappointment on her face as she blew out the flame. Surely she had known it wouldn't be possible for her to go? She must have hoped somehow. "What can we bring you, Raneid?" he asked gently.

"Oh," she said, and he heard the little catch in her voice, "a new book, and a tree to plant by the door."

"You shall have them," he promised, and he meant it. She should have her tree if he had to throw out half the wagon load.

He was filled with pity for her. She had not

seen anyone other than the Williamses in June for the sheepshearing, and it would probably be June again before she saw them once more. Was she beginning to realize this was the way her life would be year after year, minding the sheep while Arne went to town? Sometimes, if they were prosperous or lucky enough they might find a herder, but most of the time it would be too much trouble, and she would live out her life on this desolate plain, busy with the endless tasks, and the children when they came. He shuddered. Somehow he must get her away.

The next day Arne spent getting the wagon ready and Raneid herded the sheep. She took paper and pen with her and sat down, in a very different mood from the previous days, to write a letter to her parents. They had sent letters from Chicago and from Pierre when the wool went in, but it was too soon to expect letters, even if they had thought to tell their relatives to send the letters through to Belle Fourche.

Raneid wrote:

My dear parents, Ole, and Knut;

I hope you have received our letters and even now some are coming for us across the sea. I long for them daily, and hope we will soon have visitors with letters for us, but no one ever comes to this place.

I reported on the sheep clipping in my last letter, and must tell you we have done much since.

Our wool clip brought a good price, they say, yet it does not seem much for all that we must have for the winter. As for the garden we had little from it. Things do not grow as they do at home; the potatoes were small and few, but with a sweet taste. The vegetables did not do well since there was little rain, even though I carried water for them. The soil is like clay here, and bakes hard. Arne says we must manure it this fall and if he has time will haul some better soil from the river which is a good day's journey from here. Arne has finished the sheep shelter. There were not enough logs, so he finished it on the two ends with sod which is more plentiful than logs since we have no trees. It is open on the south, but the winds here, they say, are from the north and east in the winter. Our friend and neighbor Cal Willard, about whom I wrote, says the earlier settlers used sod for houses. I should not like that, and our house, though you would hardly call it that, is a palace by comparison.

I help Arne with the sheep herding whenever he is busy with other things. Since he finished the haying there has not been much to do, as we have not crops put in. This will be hard to believe, Father, but they plant no crops in this gumbo soil. It is fit only for grazing sheep. The rich land of which we heard so much is mainly east of the river. But Arne is quite content with his ranching life as they call it here. He does not care to farm. As for me, I would like a nice plot of ground for a garden, and another thing I wish for is trees . . . you can not imagine how desolate the land looks. There is not a single tree in sight of our house, and indeed, only a few small willows sometimes along the edges of creeks. How I long for trees, and especially in the summer. The climate here is much hotter than at home, and the winters, they say, much colder. Arne has promised to bring back some cottonwood trees from along the river when he goes for wood.

I cannot yet feel at home here. It is all so strange, and I cannot get used to a land with no trees, and no people. We hope soon to have neighbors. As it is our nearest neighbors, besides Cal, are the Williamses who are thirty English miles away so you can imagine we do not see them often.

Greet Einar and Birthe for me, and Lars and Aase. Has Aase had her child yet? And how is little Siri? I hope you tell her sometimes of Aunt Raneid, so she will not forget me. How I long to see you all and talk with you. Please do not believe, dear mother, that I have grown melancholy in any way. I am in good spirits and full of courage, but I long so much for you all. Since that is not of course possible, at least some good woman to visit with. Soon, I am sure we will have neighbors close by.

Ole, I hope you are a good boy and study hard, especially English with mother, for when you and Knut are grown, you must come see your sister, and it is well to know English. Here no one speaks Norwegian, unless they are Norwegian.

My love to you all from Raneid.

FIVE

The first day was terrible. She had not thought it possible to be so lonely. She had spent many hours alone on the sæter all during her girlhood, but somehow she had not been lonely there. There had been the cows, who came when she called them by name, and the dogs, and the tall pines, and the noise of the mountain stream, and best of all, the great mountains all around to shelter her. Here there was only the sky surrounding her on all sides, and the wind, sweeping at her across the empty prairie, as she chased the sheep before it all day. She was glad to creep into the house at night, after the sheep were on the bedground and pull the door to behind her. But in the morning she had to go out

again.

It was the second night that it happened. She was safely in bed, the blankets snug around her neck, dreaming that she was sailing with her father in the fjord, but then her father's boat changed into a row-boat, and she was pulling as hard as she could, for high on each wave she could see the cod cresting on her, uttering strange cries as they came. Then the cries changed to the terrified bleating of sheep, and she finally came awake, to realize that the bleating was coming from the bedground, and that it was becoming wilder and more frenzied each minute. She lay for a second, not wanting to believe it, wanting only to snuggle back down under the comforting blankets, but the sound crested past her and broke, scattering away to the west. She realized the sheep were stampeding. Was Oskar chasing them? She could hear his wild, excited barking growing fainter and fainter. As she fumbled for shoes and stockings in the half-dark, she swore Norwegian curses to herself. She should have put the sheep in the corral. She remembered now Arne telling her she should do so. And now it was too late.

She ran out as she was, pulling her warm cloak over her nightdress. She snatched up the sheep crook from its place beside the door, and headed west, after

the now faint sounds of the sheep. "Oskar!" She called angrily as she ran. She would give him a beating he would never forget--that Faen yævel! It was a little easier to see; the dark was lessening, and she knew the dawn was not far off. "Oskar!"

She could hear the barking louder now. Suddenly it changed to terrified howls, becoming louder each minute and coming straight for her. She stopped for a second to catch her breath, uncertain. Something was rushing at full speed upon her out of the dark and she screamed with all the power of her lungs, and flung up the sheep crook. A demon that slavered and howled and panted threw itself at her feet, and she hit at it in terror. It was only when it whimpered that she realized it was Oskar, and she had struck him with the crook.

"Oskar," she croaked in relief, her voice out of control. "You idiot dog." His terror infected her and she looked around wildly. She could see nothing, but Oskar moaned at her feet. She knelt down beside him and touched his head. It was strange, sticky, warm and wet. In the dim light she could barely see that his ear was torn off hanging against his head in an odd way, and she could feel the blood pulsing through her fingers on the side of his neck. Something had hurt him. For a fearful instant she thought she had

done it with the crook, and she sobbed in pity, both for the dog and herself. But she had not hit him that hard.

She tore off a strip of cloth along the hem of her nightgown and tied it around the dog's neck, to hold the gaping wound together. Oskar licked her hand and cowered against her knees. He was soaking wet and trembling. It was only then that she realized that her feet were wet too. It had rained in the night, and she could feel the damp air against her face.

She must find the sheep, whatever awful thing waited out there in the darkness. "Come, Oskar," she said firmly, holding him by his neck hair. He must come with her no matter how badly he was hurt, for she couldn't face the evil out there alone. There was no need to hold Oskar, however; he wouldn't leave her; he pressed against her legs so tightly she could scarcely walk. She went more cautiously now, her sheep crook held ready in her right hand, her left lightly upon the shivering dog.

When Oskar, whining, stopped she stopped too, peering into the shifting masses of gray. There was something darker there on the ground in front of her, and Oskar was looking at it, growling, his hair rising on his neck. It wasn't moving, whatever it was, and

she went toward it bravely, the sheep crook at the ready, and touched it with the hook. Oskar had stopped growling and was nosing at it, so she went up to it too, and knelt down beside it. It was one of the lambs born the past spring, its head stretched back, its eyes open and staring, but still alive, and its neck ripped from under the ear down to the shoulder, and a great gaping hole torn in the stomach, from which the glistening intestines protruded in a obscene bulge. It did not make a sound.

Raneid's stomach heaved, and the bitter bile burned through her nose and her hands, as she tried to force it back. Oskar--no, Oskar hadn't done this. It was Loki's son, the Fenris Wolf, who was about. She grew faint with terror; expecting to see his fearsome shape materialize out of the darkness, she swung her head around frantically. Then she calmed herself deliberately. How foolish of her, it was only an old Saga tale. If it was a wolf, it was real, and she must deal with it. The lamb's eyes were still open, but it did not see her. It was almost dead, she thought, but she could not leave it here alive. There was only the crook. Resolutely she stood up, and with all her strength brought down the handle of the heavy crook on the lamb's neck in the way that she had seen her father kill fish.

The lamb gave a gurgling gasp and its legs jerked out. She hoped it was dead, but she couldn't hit it again. Quickly, not looking at it, she went on, retching again as she ran, and stopping once to wipe the vomit from her fingers on the wet grass.

It seemed to her that she had run in the gray light for hours, Oskar trotting loyally beside her. She saw a few groups of sheep, one or two by themselves, their heads to the ground, panting. Surely she would find the main herd soon. If only they were still together most of them. If they had scattered too much how would she ever get them back together again? She tried not to think of that or of the panic that was invading her, as she grew more tired.

She came upon them suddenly as she ran over a small rise in the prairie. There they were, four wolf-like animals, only too small for wolves--really not much bigger than Oskar, growling and tearing at a bloody mess on the grass. They all lifted their heads at once and stared at her alertly, their ears pricking forward, their teeth showing in a terrible grin. One was bigger; the other three looked like half-grown shaggy pups. Raneid stood transfixed, feeling Oskar's growl against her leg. Then she saw what they were tearing at, another lamb, and a hot, black wave of rage

and hate lifted her up and bore her down upon them. She heard her voice shrieking like a Valkyrie, and she held the crook in both hands like a sword, and laid about her right and left. So sudden was the onslaught that she hit the biggest one across its back before it could move. She was so close that she could see the lucridous, surprised look on the animal's face, then it turned tail and ran, the smaller ones behind it. Oskar, encouraged, ran barking after them, although as Raneid remembering afterwards thinking, he took care not to get too close. Raneid chased them until she had to stop; she was gasping for breath, and a hot pain jagged in her side. Oskar immediately stopped too, and sat down beside her, watchfully, and so did the coyotes, for that was what they were, she realized now. They watched her curiously. When they saw Raneid start toward them again, they trotted slowly off, not looking back, but going steadily.

Raneid watched them for awhile, until they disappeared in the gray prairie. It was already day, the dawn had come without her noticing. It would be a cloudy day; there was no color at all in the eastern sky. Now she must find the sheep. She could see some of them, scattered in little groups here and there; they were already finding each other, bleating and

calling, moving tiredly together, driven by their instinctive urge to the herd. She found the main herd a mile further on, already drifting back to their more familiar grazing grounds. Although it was impossible to get an accurate count, she managed at least, to count enough to know that most of them were there. She found another lamb, slashed and bleeding and dead, for which she was thankful. She did not think she could kill another one.

How the day went on Raneid never afterward remembered clearly. She had no idea of the time, for the gray, low-hanging sky effectively hid the sun. Soaked through and shivering, for sometime it had begun a slow, steady drizzle, she was beyond cold. Her whole being had dwindled to following the sheep through the day; it was all she could do, she was not able to think beyond that. Sometime it would end and she could get them home and safe in the corral, but she had no idea how or when.

Sometime during that time she saw Tommie's familiar thin shape on his roan horse materialize out of the prairie and realized that she had been watching them for some time without thinking about it. At that moment she was standing teetering on the edge of a burn-out. As Tommie rode up one of her sodden feet slipped down the wet clay bank and she sat down hard on the wet ground and stayed there. She could feel the water soaking anew into her

skirts and skin, but she was too tired to get up.

Tommie reined in above her, and she looked up, seeing him watching her anxiously. "You all right, Ma'm?" he asked politely, nodding delicately in the direction from which she had come that day, and she understood. He had found the lambs and knew what had happened. She plucked at the edge of her nightgown that showed underneath her skirt. She must look terrible. The hem was torn and muddied, and sometime during the day the thick braid she wore at night had come undone and her hair hung loose and tangled about her. She pushed it back, over her shoulder.

Tommie dismounted, letting the reins of his horse drop to the ground, and the animal stood obediently, as it had been taught, while Tommie fumbled in his saddle bag, and at last brought out a piece of dried mutton, which he held out to her. She ate it ravenously. She had not had any breakfast, nor anything to eat all day, and she was suddenly giddy with hunger. She ate it and the dried crust of bread which he found for her, while he looked politely away, out over the grazing sheep.

"The coyotes came last night," she said at last.

He nodded. "I did see where they killed four," he said. "Would have butchered them, but by then it was too late. Ain't good unless you catch them right away."

She had never thought of the poor mangled lambs as

meat, but she should have. Arne would be angry, all that meat wasted. But she hadn't even had a knife with her, and besides, she didn't know how to butcher.

Tommie saw her distress, and said kindly, "Don't worry none, Ma'm, ain't nothing you could have done."

Tears started into her eyes for the first time that day, at his concern. She bent her head, hiding her face from him. "I should have thought of it at first, but it was so awful. They came before dawn, and I ran out just as I was. I thought it was Oskar who had chased them, and poor Oskar was almost killed, himself. I think it was a mother, at least one of them was bigger, and four young ones. They weren't even afraid of me, the wicked things. And I had to kill one of the lambs." Her voice was trembling, out of control, and she put her head down on her knees and wept.

"Oh Ma'm, Missus, don't cry." He sounded almost in tears himself, but Raneid could not stop. "It'll be all right." He patted her clumsily on the back as though she were a nervous horse, and Raneid despite herself, gave a hysterical snort of laughter, and stopped crying. "We'd best get Oskar home and sewed up," the boy was saying. "You have any lysol, Ma'm? That gash looks bad." Oskar had pulled off the makeshift bandage long ago, and was curled into a whimpering ball, as he licked his shoulder.

"Of course, the poor dog, he was so brave, and I hit him because I thought he was a demon." Raneid wiped away her tears on the edge of her cloak.

"Well, it's almost five, and the sheep are heading in, so why don't I take you home, Missus, and we'll fix Oskar up. Jake here will ride two."

She let him help her mount behind the saddle, and they went slowly off behind the sheep. Jake did not like Raneid's flapping skirts, and he skittered and danced lightly over the wet grass, but Tommie handled him masterfully. This boy, young as he was, not even sixteen, knew what to do, and Raneid let him, holding to him around his waist, and resting her tired head against his back. But the sucking sound of the horse's hoofs through the wet Gumbo mud thrust up another worry that had been jousting at her all day through the fog layers of her mind. Would the wagons have trouble in the rain, did he think?

He thought about this awhile, then said in his shy, polite way, trying not to worry her, she saw at once. "No, they'll make it fine, probably." "If it doesn't rain any more," Raneid finished, and she felt him nod his head. He didn't have to say anything. It was raining harder than it had been. They would be starting back tomorrow, most likely.

"Cal usually goes to town for supplies before this,"

Tommie said, then quickly, afraid she would think he was criticizing his employer, "But it was such fine weather, it fooled us all."

"Hd~~s~~tfred, that's what we call it at home," Raneid said. "Autumn peace."

"That's nice," Tommie said, and she gave him a little squeeze. He was a sweet boy. "You remind me of my brother, Ole, only you are older than he is. He and I are great friends. Perhaps he can come visit me some day, though I don't think he would like the Gumbo either."

She wondered what Tommie would say if she told him her thoughts on the Gumbo. He would be alarmed, probably, and think her crazier than he already thought her. After all, it was his home, the only one he remembered; it wasn't strange to him. How could he understand her feelings about it?

They had caught up with the sheep, grazing purposefully toward the river and home, and Tommie made a wide detour to avoid turning them back toward the west, crossed the river, and rode up on the low hill that separated the two homesteads from each other, to check on his band. They too, were grazing toward home, and all was secure.

When they reached her house, he tied his horse to the rail and came in with her to start the fire. She brought Oskar in and made him lie down for he was nervous inside.

She watched intently as Tommie mixed up a weak solution of lysol and water and poured a little into the wound. Next time she would know how to do this. "This keeps the maggots off," he explained to her. "Otherwise they eat him up. Now if you have a needle and thread, I will sew this up, and he'll be good as new in a few days."

She gave him some of the waxed thread in the childbirth case her mother had given her. Her father had used it too for sewing up animals. She had to hold the squirming, whimpering dog while Tommie roughly but competently sewed the edges of the wound together, but she did not watch. Just the sight of it almost made her retch again.

Tommie rode off to corral his own sheep, promising to come back to help her, although she assured him she was all right, and could manage now. She did not insist too much, for she was so glad to have the company of another human being, she did not care what he thought of her. Perhaps he too was lonely, for he did not refuse her offer of supper, and rode off whistling into the rain. Raneid saw the first sheep begin to show at the top of the hill, and put a kettle of water on the stove. If she hurried, she would have time for a quick bath before he came back. It would be lovely to have someone to talk to again.

SIX

Arne was not as blind to Raneid's disappointment as Cal thought, for he took the first opportunity of stating his position to Cal. They had stopped at a water hole to water the horses and eat their lunch in the warm sun on the bank. He wished with all his heart, he said, that Raneid could have gone with them. It was hard, he knew, for her to be alone so much, but she must learn to be a proper rancher's wife. He had always thought Raneid's family indulged her too much; the only girl, and beautiful too, among a family of brothers; it was not hard to understand, and Raneid herself was so sweet and unselfish it was easy to do. It had not spoiled her, but it had made her too tender, too fanciful. She did not like harshness nor ugliness of any kind, never having knowing any.

Cal listened quietly eating the bread and cheese Raneid had put in the lunch box, and occasionally passing his whiskey bottle to Arne, who handed it back untasted. Arne did not like whiskey in the middle of the day, but Cal continually forgot this.

As for himself, Arne went on, things had always been hard. He was used to it. Things had never gone well for Lars Mortenson. His farm was small and rocky and the land unproductive. When he fished in the winter, as he

had to to keep the family eating, it was always as a member of another man's crew; he never owned his own boat or even half shares in one. True, few of their neighbors did either, but it seemed as if Lars had worse luck than they did. His wife, Arne's mother, was always sick and what little extra they had went for medicines for her. Arne's sister, Anne, had married early out of necessity, and Arne and his two older brothers each followed their father on the yearly fishing expedition to the Lofoten islands--Arne at the age of twelve. The two older brothers had left home, the mother had died, and Lars was left alone on the little farm with the daughter and her worthless husband, who would not even go fishing, but depended on Lars to support him.

"I always knew what I wanted to do, though," Arne told Cal. "Raneid and I always planned that we would come to America, even when we were children. All we needed was a good season in the islands, and at last it came. A fortune in cod, that year--and most men spent it as soon as they made it, for debts, and presents, but I saved every penny . . . even though my father begged me to pay off the mortgage on the farm, and stay there with him, I knew it was now or never. I might never have such a season again, and that very next month Raneid and I were married."

"I would have been a rich man if I had stayed in Norway," he mused. "For awhile at least. But here although

I am not rich, I would be called a king there, with all this land. Even Raneid's father does not own so much. And I will be richer still, in a few years. Then Raneid will have a house with many windows, and some trees, and real rugs on the floor. She will get used to it here, and there will be children. . ."

"Perhaps it was a mistake to bring Raneid here, though," Cal said in a low voice, "My mistake, I mean, to urge you. I didn't realize that women would see it differently, and Raneid is so sensitive . . . more than most, perhaps she needs other women, some other interests. . ."

"There will be neighbors soon," Arne said firmly. "Raneid knew it would be lonely, at first. We spoke of it many times. And she misses her family. But she is young, she will make this her home soon."

"I have been thinking, myself, Arne, that perhaps this is not the best place to homestead after all. For me, as well as for you and Raneid. There is land closer even to Belle Fourche, that might be better farm land. As for me, I have almost decided that ranching is not for me. When I was home in Boston I heard rumors of gold in Alaska, lots of it. I may head there next."

"That is all right for you, Cal," Arne said after awhile. "But I am not an adventurer. I want to stay in one place, and make it the best place I can. And this is

it, for me. I don't want to farm. I did that in Norway. I've decided ranching is what I want to do, and here I can have all the land I want. This will be one of the last places settled, and I can buy land cheaper here, it seems to me, than where it is more in demand, as good farming land would be. In time I will run thousands of sheep. This is good sheep country; you've said that many times."

"But what about Raneid," Cal persisted miserably. It seemed to him that everything he said only made Arne the more determined to stay. "She may never like this country, and if what you say is true, and it settles slowly, she will have no neighbors for a long time. Someone like Raneid needs other people."

Cal heard the hardened note in Arne's voice when he spoke again, the tone of finality. "She is my wife. She must learn, that is all. She will learn."

"If it hadn't been for me, I feel you would have settled somewhere else, and Raneid might have been happier," Cal said in a low voice.

Arne laughed. "Now quit worrying, Cal. We would have ended up here anyway, or some other place just as lonely. I did not ever intend to farm, you know. As for Raneid, one forgets how strong she is because she is skjønn, so beautiful, but after all, she has stayed alone before. She has spent summers in her father's

sæter, many times." He began to pack up the lunch, and Cal, knowing the subject was dismissed and that he would not dare to bring it up again, went to harness the horses.

Cal had planned to spend only one day buying supplies, but it turned out to be impossible to do all that needed to be done in one day. Cal knew many people in Belle Fourche, and he introduced Arne to all they met, so much time was spent in talking. Arne was at ease with them all, despite his limited English, and everyone they met was obviously very much interested in him. Cal saw how the women, the wives of the men they met, would look at Arne appraisingly from under their bonnets, and urge him to bring his wife and come visit. Arne was handsome, with his tanned face and hair and moustache bleached almost white from the summer's sun, and so obviously unaware of it that he charmed the ladies at once.

Cal took Arne to Peterson's general store to do their buying, and immediately he became great friends with the storekeeper and his wife, who helped him there. They were Norwegians too and the three of them talked so fast in Norwegian that Cal could catch only a little of what they were saying until one of them would remember

him, and include him in the conversation. But then they would go rattling off again. Cal saw a side of Arne that he had not seen before. Freed of the restraint that his unsure English imposed on him, he laughed and joked wittily with the Petersons, and Cal again readjusted his estimate of Arne.

But by the evening of the second day Arne had had enough of town. He was eager to be off, and Cal, who once might have lingered for days on a buying trip, was impatient too, imagining Raneid alone and what might be happening there. They left before dawn on the fourth day they had been gone, and at once Cal saw that their luck had not held. The weather, fine and fair, had changed and it was a cold, drizzly day that greeted them as they went to hitch the horses to the wagons. Neither spoke, but Cal saw from the anxious way Arne looked at the sky, and kicked at the earth in the street, that he was wondering, too, how much it had rained. He had not even seen the Gumbo mud yet, but he was enough of a sailor to know how important the weather was.

Cal pulled up the collar of his coat, and hunched himself down on the wagon seat for the long drive ahead. There would be no lingering about by water holes today. The horses, too, seemed to sense the urgency

and settled down at once, pulling steadily into their collars. Once they left town, the wind began to blow harder, driving the fine rain into their faces, but the road underneath was still firm and hard. There would be no trouble here, Cal knew, for this was the road to Pierre, constantly traveled, and besides, they were not yet on the Gumbo itself.

All too soon, it seemed to Cal, they reached the turnoff to the left, which led them gradually into the Gumbo, and thirty miles away, the ranch. It was early still, and Cal felt hopeful. They might make it yet, if all went well. But almost immediately there was trouble. They had been slowly entering the region of the Gumbo, and for a few miles the soil was firm. But gradually the wheels began to sink deeper into the ruts of the trail, and the horses pulled harder and harder. A dozen times the wagons stopped, and Arne and Cal jumped out with their shovels and cleaned the wheels. And it rained harder and harder.

At one of the stops, Arne pulled out some bread and cheese from the lunch box and Cal realized that it was far past lunch. They had been creeping past Bear Butte, on the right, for some time, and Cal knew by this landmark how far they were still from home.

"Well, Cal, we won't make it tonight," Arne said

calmly. He wore his sailor's oilskins, and he was an odd sight sitting there on the wagon seat thought Cal. Still, he looked dry and warm, and although the horses rolled their eyes and snorted whenever he moved, they were almost too weary to do even that. "A few more miles is all the horses can take, with this load. What do you think?"

"You're right, of course," Cal said, wondering why he felt irritated. "There is a water hole not far ahead. Perhaps we had better camp there. And hope this damn rain lets up," he couldn't resist adding.

The rain had thickened into twilight by the time they found a place to spend the night. They unharnessed the horses, watered them and picketed them out on the sodden earth to graze. There was no wood of course, and they had not had any room for the kindling they had planned to bring back for the winter. It was as dismal a camp, thought Cal, as any he'd seen, but Arne seemed philosophical about it. They spread a ground tarpaulin, and another one for a roof, stretching it between the two wagons, which they had drawn up side by side, letting the sides hang down to form a two-sided shelter, so they were protected from the rain and wind as long as the wind stayed in the same direction.

For supper they finished the last of the supplies

Raneid had packed in Arne's lunchbox. The flatbread and dried mutton was tasteless and tough, but Cal produced a bottle of brandy to wash it down. He had been drinking it all day; it was the only thing which had made the day bearable. He had been drinking a lot since he came to the Gumbo but he made it a practice never to get drunk except in an emergency, but since he had a great capacity for liquor, he managed to consume a lot of liquor. Arne drank too now that the day's work was done, for, as he told Cal, any amount of liquor affected him strongly. Too much drink, when he was in a quarrelsome mood, made him only more quarrelsome. It was a family failing, he said; his father was the same way, and so was his grandfather. He had many times seen his father fly into his wild "berserker" rages, as his mother had called them, and he had drunk himself into that state on two frightening occasions. "It's something we Norse cannot help," he had told Cal. "It was how the Vikings nerved themselves up when they were raiding a village, you know. One forgets everything, and does anything. But me, I like to know what I'm about."

So now he drank sparingly as Cal passed the bottle to him, and when he reached the stage of being pleasantly warm and jolly, he refused the bottle, wrapped

himself in his quilt, and listened as Cal drank and talked.

"Alaska," he was saying. "It's the last frontier, Arne. But for gold, not farming. Of course there is gold here too, in the Hills, but by now the best claims are staked, and besides there is too much trouble with the Indians. It's their land by rights, you know, and although I don't have too many principles, it still doesn't seem right to take it from them. Besides, it's dangerous. But in Alaska, now, there's miles of country and few people, even Indians; any man can stake a claim. I'm not a farmer, Arne, nor a rancher, but maybe I'm a miner."

"What will you do with your claim here?" Arne asked. "It will be proved up by spring. You'll own it. You'd just leave it?"

"Not just leave it, man. Sell it." Cal paused, the obvious answer occurring to him, and, no doubt, to Arne at the same time. What a fool he was! Here he was trying to get Arne to leave, and offering him every enticement to stay. Hadn't Arne told him, not two days before, that he intended to buy all the land he could? He stopped, and took another swallow of brandy. It was too late. Arne had made the connection. "Would you sell it to me, Cal? As long as you're leaving, it

would be a wonderful chance to get more land, and adjoining mine, too. It would be perfect. And next year, Raneid can prove up on a claim to the west."

He mistook Cal's hesitation. "I'd find the money somehow. I've just about used up my capital, but . . . but there is a little extra, we've been saving."

"Oh, Hell," Cal said helplessly. "It's not the money, you know that, Arne. But are you really sure you plan on staying? You don't want to saddle yourself with more land, if there's a chance of . . ."

"We're staying."

Arne took a swallow of brandy to seal the agreement. He hadn't meant to do this, but Arne was already holding out his hand, and there was nothing he could do but shake it.

SEVEN

Raneid became more certain, with each day that passed, that she would never see Arne again. So deep was her anguish that she scarcely thought of Cal at all. She knew that somewhere out there on the prairie Arne had perished; some malignant force had sucked him down into the Gumbo mud, and all with him, never to be seen again. She had known this would happen all along; they were not meant to live in this place, forsaken by all but

coyotes and rattlesnakes. All that remained was for her to find her way out of this Muspellsheim, this hell-place, and back home. Hardly aware of what she was doing, she planned how she would escape. She would sell the sheep back to Fred Williams, and Tommie would drive her to Pierre. She knew she could find her way back to Norway from there. It was only here that she was lost.

When she saw the white covered tops of the wagons appear on the sixth day a barely visible speck at first, then, as the distance lessened, billowing suddenly larger, so close that she could see the horses, and the men driving them, she felt first the sharp sickness of disappointment, that instantly dried up her anguish, but at the same time exposed fully to her how much she had counted on them not coming back. Yet in the next instant normality was restored, and she felt the purging tide of her love for Arne surge through her. Arne was home; he had come back to her.

It was late afternoon; she had been moving with the sheep toward home, when she had seen the wagons. Now she left the sheep and ran along the trail, to intersect them as they crept along. It was a bright windy day, the rain had ceased that morning, and already the Gumbo was beginning to dry. She reached the trail

and ran along it to meet them. As they drew closer she saw with shock that the black horse, Tolander, was strangely splotted with gray, and the bay, Tor, had developed grey stockings in place of white. The white canvas top of the wagon in front, their wagon, also had big gobs of mud on it, and when she saw Arne, she cried aloud in pity. His face was a muddy mask through which his eyes peered redly, and his shirt was coated to the elbows with mud, and smeared in great murky streaks across the front.

He stopped the team, and she saw the muddy mask crack as he smiled, and held down his hand, to help her up. She seized it, and sprang up on the seat beside him, throwing her arms around his neck. He took one hand from the reins, and hugged her awkwardly, kissing her on the mouth. His mouth tasted gritty, and she felt his hand rasp muddily against her back. "Oh Arne," was all she could think to say.

"Hello, Raneid. Well, we finally made it."

"Oh Arne, I thought you were lost in the Gumbo. I thought I'd never see you again."

"It wasn't as bad as all that, Raneid. We got stuck in the mud, as you can see, and had to keep stopping to knock the mud off. It weighs more than the wagon when it clots up the wheels like that. I tell

you, it is hard to believe. But how did things go here at home?" He looked at her closely for the first time. "You look tired too. Was there any trouble?"

"Oh-oh, Arne." Despite all her good resolves, Raneid began to cry. Arne gave a little cluck of annoyance. He hated to see her cry. "Come, now, stop that. The sheep . . . are they all right?" He glanced for reassurance toward the sheep, grazing their way homeward to the north.

The sheep! Always thinking of the sheep first. Wasn't he worried that something might be wrong with her? Angrily, Raneid wiped the tears off her cheeks with her dirty hands, and stopped crying. She told him what had happened, and by the time she was describing the dying lamb, Arne was swearing softly in Norwegian. He did not however ask Raneid if she had put the sheep in the corral, and she also left out the advice Tommie had given her.

"Six lambs dead, wasted. I'd like to get my hands on that old bitch coyote. She won't last long if I see her, I promise you that." He looked at her apprehensively. "I hope you thought to butcher them, at least, Raneid."

It was the question she had been dreading. "Arne, you know I never butchered at home. I don't even

know how. And to tell the truth, I never thought of it. I had to keep with the sheep anyway. The coyote might have come back, and they were terrified."

"God Damn! That's what comes of leaving a woman in charge!" At his roar, the tired horses pricked up their ears, and quickened their pace for a few steps, then lapsed back into their plodding walk.

Raneid sobbed louder; then the injustice of it struck her. The quick flush of anger dried up her tears. "Damn yourself! Should I have left the sheep so more of them could be slaughtered? Then you would yell at me for that. As if it wasn't hard enough, keeping those blatting idiots together, and not knowing whether you were coming back or not."

Arne was silenced. Raneid knew the power of her anger, and so she was very seldom truly angry. Since their marriage she had scarcely opposed him, but this was too much to bear. Next time he could stay by himself, if he could do any better. She knew in a minute or two he would be sorry he had sworn at her and apologize, but she did not wait. Filled with the righteous energy of anger, she stood up on the wagon floor, gathered her short skirts in one hand and leaped over the slowly turning wagon wheel, landed nimbly on the springy sod, and was off up the trail, running

swiftly, down the sloping bank of the ford, splashing through the still muddy water and up the bank on the other side to the house, slamming the door breathlessly and decisively behind her.

Raneid's rages never lasted long; as she always forgave Arne first, even when it had been his fault. He sometimes sulked for days, neither forgetting nor forgiving. Raneid had never liked discord about her. Peace at the expense of her pride was better to her than no peace at all. Yet now she found herself in the middle of the kitchen, shaking the ashes out of the stove coldly and unrelentingly. She knew her duty; she would never have dreamed of not performing these duties out of spite, yet it was with an unwilling heart that she built the fire, first with wood, and then when it was blazing well, with a few lumps of the precious coal Arne and Cal had hauled weeks before. She filled the water reservoir on the stove with water from the rain barrel at the corner of the house, and put a large kettle of it on top of the stove. She went to the root cellar for potatoes, noting automatically that the first sheep were showing at the top of the bluff.

As she went about her chores, she watched what the men were doing out of the corner of her eye. Arne had brought the wagon close to the back door, and

unhitched there, leading the weary team to the barn. Raneid wondered if he had found a pump at Belle Fourche, and had bought all the other things she had listed. She thought of a hundred questions she wanted to ask him, but then she would remember, and run back into the house.

Cal drove up to the back door to unload Arne's part of his load, and Raneid and he spoke politely. Raneid knew immediately that Arne had told him about the coyotes, the way he spoke cheerfully of everything but that. As he was leaving, he went out to his wagon, and from behind the seat, brought forth a carefully wrapped burlap bundle, and presented it to Raneid.

"If you plant it in a corner by the porch, it should grow," he told her, and she unwrapped the bundle. Inside, its roots bound in earth, and wrapped in moss, was a spindly lilac seedling, a few yellowed leaves still clinging to it.

Raneid's eyes filled with light, and she smiled delightedly at Cal. "You didn't forget!" she said and gave him the smile she had wanted to give Arne.

"It should be planted at once," he said. "I'll just dig a hole right now, since my shovel is handy."

When the hole was dug beside the porch and the seedling planted, well watered with some of Arne's bath

water, Arne had finished rubbing down the horses and was coming wearily up the path. He grunted when he saw the lilac bush. "Should have been bigger, for all the time you spent looking for it," he said sourly, and Raneid felt all the good will generated by Cal leak away. She turned to Cal briskly. "Now you must come into supper," she said. "It is already cooking." The smell of frying potatoes and onions wafted from the open kitchen door.

Cal hesitated, then saw, at the same time as Raneid, Arne's frown.

"Some other time, Raneid. I know Tommie has been watching for me." Arne did not urge him to stay, Raneid noted.

With Cal gone the sense of strain between them grew wretchedly. Raneid busied herself with preparing his bath in the laundry tub in the middle of the kitchen floor, in looking out the door every few minutes to see if the sheep were all right, and tending supper. Arne took off his muddy boots on the back porch and beat his trouser legs with a stick in the yard, trying to knock some of the mud off them. At last he came out of the bedroom naked, his gray face and arms grotesque above his white body, and lowered himself gingerly into the tub of water, as though it might burn him. Raneid,

however, had taken care that it was not too hot, and she paid no attention to his mutterings, which he did not allow to become recognizable, since he could not, in any justice, protest.

He sat silently in the tub for awhile, but soon the soothing effect of the water, even uncomfortable as he was with his knees up to his chin, began to take effect. He sighed, stretched, and splashed invitingly. Raneid at the stove, her back turned, stirred the potatoes and smiled. He wanted her to begin. Really, as if it would hurt him to be the first, just once, to say he was sorry. But at last she too could hold out no longer. Stepping around the tub to put the plates and glasses on the table, she caught the quick upward glance he sent her. He looked ludicrous, with his knees drawn up to his chin, fumbling in the water for the soap.

"Here, let me," she said, taking the cloth from him, she wet his head and soaped it, then his back. As if he were a child she soaped him all over, then took the kettle of hot water from the stove, mixed it with cold, and poured it over his head.

All the time she was doing this he talked, telling her of his trip from beginning to end. He told her of Belle Fourche, a tiny town, he said, but with several good stores, where one might buy whatever one

needed. And the best news of all, the railroad had now reached Belle Fourche, this very summer in fact, and wool and lambs could now be taken there and shipped to Rapid City, instead of the much longer trip to Pierre. This would necessitate someone going with the shipment, as there was as yet no one dealing with either wool or lambs in Belle Fourche, but by next year, they could surely hire one of Tommie's brothers to stay with the sheep, and she could go with him to Belle Fourche, perhaps even to Rapid City.

Raneid listened, her stony heart softening by degrees. He thought he could bribe her into staying, but what would he think if she told him how she had envisioned him dead, and the plans she had made to escape. A dozen times the words rose to her lips, but in the end, when he had talked himself out, and he turned to her, at the table, as they sat with after dinner cups of coffee, to ask her about the affairs of the ranch, she said nothing of this. She told him again about the sheep, and the coyotes, and that the cow was fine, and that she had locked up the chickens every night. The coyotes had not bothered the other animals. All the while they talked, one or the other had gone constantly to the door to see that the sheep were proceeding down the hill to their bedground by the river.

In the last rays of the sun, they walked out together to the top of the bluff to see that there were no stragglers, and to secure the animals for the night. Raneid had already milked the cow, and Arne had fed the pigs and chickens. The wind had dropped, and the sun balanced itself on the far horizon, almost as though it hated to leave the world of day. Raneid knew that Odin lingered for one last look at her, to show that he kept watch over her still, but she said nothing of this to Arne. She did not want to anger him again, now that peace was restored, and lately he had become annoyed with her whenever she mentioned the old gods, telling her that people no longer believed such things, and Cal would think her crazy, an "id-e-ot," if he heard her. So she said nothing, but she no longer read the Saga tales at night, and although she still said her prayers, it was not to Almighty God and Jesus Christ that she prayed.

They drove the sheep into the corral, and Arne pulled the pole gate to, making sure the wire hoops were securely over top and bottom. Then in the last of the light, they began to unload the wagon, for now, their quarrel made up, Arne was as eager as Raneid to see what lay under the tarp. The one-hundred pound sacks of flour and sugar he stacked in their bedroom corner, behind the curtain. Raneid marvelled at the

pretty print of the flour sacking, and Arne told her he had taken care to pick out all those of the same pattern, so she would have enough to make herself a skirt or waist from it. There were cases of canned tomatoes, and vegetables, sacks of dried peaches and apples, rice and macaroni, tins of Arbuckle coffee beans, which when emptied would make useful containers, tins of kerosene, and wonder of wonders, a barrellful of salted herring.

"There are some Norskies in Belle Fourche, too," Arne told her, explaining that the owner of one of the two general stores was Norwegian, and had come to the area four years ago, when it was still a territory. "He says there are many Norwegians east of the river, and in the Hills. His wife works there too, and she sent you this," and he pulled forth a bundle of newspapers. "It is the Scandinavian, the newspaper published in Chicago, the same one Uncle August sent us. She says you must come stay with her next time we come to Belle Fourche, and I promised that I would bring you."

Raneid's eyes filled with tears. To think that some strange woman had thought kindly of her, to send her something to read, the very thing she needed most. But Arne was going on, rummaging around in the big wooden box which held an alarming number of things, it

seemed to Raneid. Did they really need all that for the winter? He took out jugs of molasses, a precious box of loaf sugar, which Raneid hid immediately behind a pitcher on the highest shelf, to be rationed out with the after-dinner coffee, and to visitors. There was thread and needles for her, and some lovely warm red flannel, which Mrs. Peterson, the store keeper's wife, had said made the warmest underclothes.

As they unpacked the boxes and crates of supplies, Arne told her the rumors he had heard in town about the unrest among the Indians. Everywhere, at the stores, the cafe, hotel and bars, the men had talked of the strange new dance the Indians were doing on the reservation, called a ghost dance, started by an Indian, Paiute, who lived near Walker's Lake in Indian Territory. Apparently some of the Dakota Sioux chiefs had gone to see Wovoka, which was the prophet's name and had brought the dance back to the Dakota Indians. As nearly as he could understand it, Arne said, it seemed that the Indians believed that Wovoka had been transported to heaven in a vision and had learned that the Great Spirit was coming back to the world to drive the white man out of America and bring back the wilderness to the Indians. The Indians danced because the Great Spirit had told them they must do this in adoration of the Messiah who was

coming back.

Raneid listened, fascinated. "But why does that bother the white men?"

"Because they think the Indians are working themselves up to go on the warpath again, I suppose. Mr. Peterson said that is nonsense, that it is a religious dance, and the white man is wrong to try to change the Indians' religion."

"Well, I think he is right," Raneid said vehemently. They had talked much of the Indians before coming to America, and Arne's Uncle August had told them many tales of his meetings with them, but the only ones Raneid and Arne had yet seen had been in the streets of Pierre, huddled in dirty blankets along the edge of the board sidewalks, or driving their wagons, overflowing with women and children, in the streets. Raneid in particular had been disappointed, for she had absorbed the tales she had read and heard about the Indians eagerly, and there was nothing about these poverty-stricken, dirty Indians that suggested the wild, free and dangerous people she had heard about. She felt a deep sorrow for these people who had been driven from their lands so that people like she and Arne could live there instead. When they read of the horrible Indian massacres at home, or listened to Uncle August's tales, she would become

indignant. "What would we do if the Swedes invaded us and tried to take our land from us? Just what the Indians did . . . fight." Her father and mother had agreed that this was true, pointing out, however, that many white people who had felt the same as she were killed all the same in the uprisings. The thing was true in principle, but it is hard to maintain your principles when neighbors and friends and even yourself and family are being killed for being where, actually, you yourself had no right to be, her father said.

"You would like Mr. Peterson," Arne told her now. "And so would your father. He says we have taken everything from the Indians--their homes, their land, their livelihood their religion even. He is angry with the agent at the Pine Ridge Reservation, a man named Foyer, who is going around talking about a big outbreak. What does he know about it, Peterson says. He is from the East and looks on the Indian as nothing but a savage."

"And if there is an outbreak, it is the Indian who will be blamed," Raneid said.

"That is true. Peterson says the dance has been going on for two years, but only now is the government getting worried. They have decided to punish the Indians by not making the regular clothing issue to them, and cutting their beef ration in half. Peterson

says they are starving, and that this is what will provoke them into an uprising, if anything will. He has written to Washington, but all they do is refer him to that nincompoop Foyer, who is scared to death of them."

"What will we do if there is an uprising?" Raneid asked curiously. She was not in the least afraid; it seemed to her that the Indians had a just cause for being angry. "We could give them some of the sheep, and they probably wouldn't bother us."

"It's not likely they would come this far west. Anyway, Peterson says they think that evil spirits live here in the Gumbo, just as the good ones dwell in the Black Hills."

Raneid smiled triumphantly. "I always said so!"

"Raneid, you are as pagan as any Indian," Arne said in exasperation. "And you're supposed to be civilized, a Christian."

"I'm not a Christian, and neither are you. And anyway, I think those Indians are a lot more civilized than we are, to tell you the truth. What makes us think we know so much more about religion than they do? They have a Great Spirit too--isn't it all another name for God, or Odin, or Jove? What does it matter if it works for them? They worship nature because they live with it,

just as the old Norse did. It's a lot more realistic than ours, if you think about it."

But Arne did not want to think about religion, or argue it again with Raneid. His mother, Raneid knew, had been an extremely religious woman, praying and exhorting her sons and husband and daughter unceasingly, and they had early learned to agree with her rather than argue, but they had none of them listened. And for all her piety, she had died in agony of a lasting disease. And his father, for instance, who had never cared one way or another, was a hale and healthy old man, without even a rotten tooth to repent of. It puzzled Arne, when he thought about it, but he did not often think about it, and Raneid knew this, as she knew, also, that he did not mind her unorthodox views, as long as she kept quiet about them, and did not go around shocking people. That had been all right in their own village, he had told her before they came to America, but here in this strange country, she must learn to mind her tongue and not act as if she were under a special dispensation and could say what she pleased.

"The Gumbo isn't part of the Reservation, is it Arne? I know Cal said it wasn't, but we must be sure. It would be wrong to be living on the Indian's land when we have taken all the rest from them."

"No, no, I just told you Ran, the Indians think it is haunted. It never was part of it, and Cal has told us that even before the white man came the Indians never hunted here much. The buffalo stayed closer to the Black Hills, and the Missouri where there was more water. Now, put down that coffee pot, and come to bed."

"But all this mess. . ." Raneid set down the cup she had been filling with coffee at the stove.

"We can save the rest until tomorrow," Arne pulled off Raneid's apron with one tug of the carefully tied bow, tossed it over the box in the middle of the floor, and nuzzled Raneid's neck with his newly shaven chin.

"I missed you, Ran. I'd much rather sleep with you than Cal. He snores. Why are there always so many buttons Raneid . . . you only need one or two. There goes one, now. I'll find it for you in the morning." He threw the dress and waist over the apron and unfastened Raneid's black braids from the top of her head and unplaited them, the fine hairs catching on his rough hands, as he ran them through the warm dark mass. "Come, I'll brush your hair for you."

Afterwards Raneid crept out of bed quietly, rebrushed her tangled hair, plaited it quickly into the two loose braids she wore at night, and blew out the

lamp, still burning on the table. Arne was usually not so wasteful of the coal oil. Through the one window by the table she could see the October moon shining brightly outside, turning the frosty world to silver. She turned to tell Arne, but he was sound asleep, breathing heavily through his mouth, as he always did when very tired. She pulled the quilt up snugly around his shoulders, and lay back down beside him without putting on her nightgown, feeling all along her naked cold body his delicious warmth. On the edge of sleep she remembered how the day had begun, the plans she had made if Arne had been dead or lost, and she shuddered so violently that Arne stirred in his sleep. Arne was safe home, and peace restored between them, but deep inside remained forever some residue of those terrible days alone.

EIGHT

For a space the days moved quickly, even for Raneid. There were many things to do to get ready for the winter. Cal and Arne labored for three whole days installing the pump Arne had bought, for first the platform had to be made from the rough cut boards Arne had purchased in Belle Fourche. He planed them so Raneid wouldn't get splinters in her feet, he jokingly explained

to Cal, who wondered why he bothered--then they must be cut to the proper length with the saw, and fitted together. Arne did this with pegs instead of nails, as he had been taught by his father. He had only a handful of the precious nails and these he saved for something more important. When finished the platform was a work of art, for Arne was a careful and devoted craftsman, and although Cal visibly chafed at this thoroughness, as he had done with the building of the cabin and the barn, he was also esthetically pleased with the result. Through the hole in the platform, carefully cut to the exact diameter, the long pipe was fitted, and then the pump was placed over top of all.

At last the moment came when Raneid stepped to the place of honor, and lifted the pump handle up and down; it creaked emptily at first, then she felt the pipe fill with water, and gush miraculously from the open iron spout and splash over her shoes. Arne shouted with joy, and Cal cheered, and Raneid felt for a moment, for perhaps the first time, at one with the men and their labors. This was her pump too, and gladly she pumped the house bucket full and carried it to the house. There would, at least, be plenty of water for them during the winter, and for the animals too. In Norway, not even wealthy farmers as her father was, had pumps.

But a moment later her lightness of heart sank back again into the numbing drench of the strange enervating drowsiness she had been feeling most of the summer. She had thought that when fall came her energy would return, but it had not, although the days since the storm had been brisk and clear, even cold at night, with frost sparkling in the early morning. The cool weather had not revived her, nor had her longing for home abated. With the end of the summer heat she no longer dreamed of the waterfalls crashing and roaring about her ears. Now it was colors she sought for, the gold and green of the pines and birch intermingled on the mountainside, throwing their reflections into the blue of the fjord, where the little eider ducks floated like miniature sailboats. Here all was the same dull gold, the buffalo grass waving in the wind, and over all the great monstrous sky hovering as though it waited to swallow the land and everything on it. But soon enough even the gold would be gone, and all would be white, white and blue, for Cal had boasted of the clear and sunny winter, when the snow came, and the blizzards . . . ah, that would be the worst, when the snow came. Why had she not escaped when she had the chance?

She lifted the pail of water to the shelf beside the washstand, and stood suspended in her thought,

mindless for the moment, dreaming out the window. There was only prairie out there, prairie and sky, but far away on the very edge of the horizon a low hill rose, rounded to the sky, and sank down again into the prairie. It was the only irregularity on the whole horizon.

She was trying to catch hold of the thought that troubled her, and at last she grasped it. It was that in all their struggles together, she had felt no joy in Arne's joy, except for that brief moment today. She had stood apart watching, as he and Cal worked and sweated and created. She felt no resentment of Cal, rather relief, for he had taken her place, had taken upon himself the task of responding to Arne's unbounded delight in his own land and strength. In this moment she knew that she could never be part of this life that Arne had chosen for herself and him; never work as one with him for them both, never toil through the years for some promise or reward in a distant future. She was an alien in an alien land, and she would remain so until she died. At this knowledge, she dropped her head and wept against the back of her hand.

Most of all she mourned that lost lightness of spirit that had sent her many a time running down a mountainside for the sheer thrill of speed, and the sure

knowledge that someday she would leave the ground and fly as did the eagles, soaring with them above the highest mountain peak. Or that moment that would never come again, as she stood at the bow of her father's boat, lifted for one breathless moment high on a wave, the sails filled with wind. To be happy again . . . or to love Arne in that all encompassing way that they had loved beside the waterfall. Never. It would never happen to her again. She would grow old here, and die, and each year her soul would grow heavier, until at last when they laid her in the Gumbo, she would be indistinguishable from the soil itself. No.

The men's voices outside brought her from her dream, and she turned quickly away from the door, to hide her face, hearing the clatter of their boots and feeling the rush of cold air against her neck.

"The coffee will be ready in a minute," she said, and it was true; sometime she had filled the pot with water, and it was about to boil. She did not remember it. Silently she measured out the fresh-ground coffee, spoonful, by spoonful, stirring it in, and pulling the pot to the back of the stove, so the grounds would settle. Against the background of the men's voices, the wind howled softly, rising like a

dirge, filling the empty places in Raneid's head with its sound.

* * * * *

Now the days, short and crisp, drew in upon themselves at either end. It was the end of October; the mornings white with frost, the days cold and clear. It did not rain again, and the wind blew day after day, bleaching the color from the grass until it stood golden-white against the sky. Still it was not quite cold enough for butchering, for the cold weather at night sometimes was almost hot in the middle of the afternoon. Raneid longed, as they all did, for fresh meat. The salted herrings that Arne had brought back from the store were hoarded as if they were made of gold. Each day Arne tethered the wether lamb they had selected for butchering in the choicest plot of grass, on the theory that the less running it did the fatter and more tender it would be.

The sheep, with the advent of cooler weather, did nothing but run. Intoxicated with the cool air and their own devilishness, they kept moving constantly, eating on the move, snatching mouthfuls of grass as they half-walked, half-ran, in that queer rapid gate that kept a person moving at a fast walk. It was Raneid

who did most of the herding now, for Arne had begun to dig fenceholes for a pasture for the horses and cow, for they could not be tethered out in the winter as they had been in the summer, and he wanted to get the holes dug before the ground froze. He had cut the posts in the river bottom near Belle Fourche one day in the summer, and they were now seasoned. The barbed wire he would string later. Sometimes Cal came over to help, although Arne protested he could never pay him back. Cal only laughed, and insisted that he was paid back enough with Raneid's good meals, and besides, he said, he had nothing much to do since Tommie took care of the sheep.

One late afternoon, coffee time, for Raneid had just brought coffee and a dried apple cake out to Arne where he worked on the fence, Cal rode into the yard on his sleek black Jubal, leading a sorrel mare by the reins. He dismounted, dropped Jubal's reins to the ground, and handed the mare's reins to Raneid with a flourish.

"Your horse, Madam," he said.

Raneid stared at him, automatically reaching out for the reins. The horse pricked her ears forward, and watched Raneid steadily and alertly with her great liquid eyes.

"My horse!"

"My Christmas present to you, a little early,

Fru Mortenson. I just happened to find my errant horses wondering close at hand, several weeks ago, and this little mare caught my eye. The perfect horse for Raneid, I thought, quiet and well-behaved, and a perfect beauty. So here she is," and he stroked the horse on her sleek neck.

Cal had been planning this gift to Raneid all summer, in fact, but he had not had the time to look for his herd of horses, which he allowed to run loose on the Gumbo, and which, that summer, had ranged farther, apparently, than they usually did. He had originally planned to be a horse rancher, but the Gumbo had proved to be too sparsely populated for that, so instead he had bought the sheep, allowing the horses to forge for themselves, and rounding them up whenever he needed another horse.

"But you can't do that," Raneid murmured, looking at Arne.

Arne was scowling. Cal saw that this gift to Raneid did not please Arne, but he had planned exactly what he should say having foreseen such resistance. "You can't do that, Cal," Arne repeated. "You can't go around giving us gifts all the time. You've helped us enough. I say no."

"I'm not giving it to you, Arne," Cal pointed

out reasonably. I'm giving it to Raneid as a gift, a Christmas present. It is certainly better for the horse, isn't it, than running around the range loose, waiting for some Indian or homesteader to corral her? And see, she likes Raneid."

The horse had not moved, as it had been trained, but had extended its neck and was gently breathing on Raneid's neck, snuffling to take in the scent of this strange new human. Raneid's desire for the horse showed in her eyes, and she stepped closer to the animal and stroked its soft nose. Cal, seeing the picture they made, Raneid's dark head against the bright sorrel coat, looked mutely at Arne, and saw he was seeing the same thing. "Well, all right," he said gruffly, adding, "I thank you, we both thank you. But it is too much."

Raneid's face had lightened at Arne's words until it blazed with joy. Cal watched her, remembering how long it had been since Raneid's face looked like that, and his heart lifted. Any sacrifice was worth it, to make Raneid look like that.

"Thank you, oh thank you, thank you, Cal. I will take such care of her." She flung both arms around the mare's neck, and was almost knocked down as the horse, unused to such emotion, sidestepped nervously.

"Careful, Raneid." Cal laughed. "She is a

high-spirited thing, although gentle. She will take careful handling for awhile, until she is used to you. But go ahead, try her."

He held the horse until Raneid was in the saddle, and adjusted the stirrups for her. She reined the horse around and cantered off across the prairie, the mare's head high, her eyes walled skittishly at Raneid's skirts, pulled up in the front so she could ride astride, but so full that they were modest enough. Cal smiled to himself as he thought of the sensation such a sight would cause in the East. All the ladies he knew still rode side-saddle.

"I didn't have a side-saddle," Cal said to Arne. "She's not used to skirts. It will take her awhile to settle down."

"Raneid does have a skirt for riding, one of those divided things, you know. Her mother made it, when we came to America. In Norway, all the farm girls ride astride. Raneid has since she was a child. I don't think she would ride in one of those queer side contraptions anyway. She can ride anything, she's a good rider. Her father is a rich man in Norway . . . he always has horses. But here I am as rich as he is, and richer, soon. Besides, it was his wife's dowry that made him rich. She is from a shipping family in

Bergen, and he was only a poor farmer when she married him."

Cal looked at Arne in astonishment. It was the longest speech he had ever heard Arne make, and spoken in mixed English and Norwegian, not all comprehensible. But he understood very well what Arne meant. To Arne, Cal was the rich man, the big farmer who dispensed largess to his poorer neighbors, who were not only poorer, but because they were, somehow inferior. It accounted for his reluctance to let Raneid have the horse; and his never asking Cal to help him if he could possibly manage alone. Perhaps all along he had been insulting Arne's pride when all he wanted to do was selfishly enjoy their companionship. True, he had taken satisfaction in helping Arne, but only because he liked him. And part of it of course, he could never explain to Arne. . . that other nebulous feeling of love and pity for a beautiful, enchanting, heartsick girl.

"Someday you will be the biggest rancher in the Gumbo, Arne," he said soberly, searching for the right words. "Someday I will need help, or some other man will, and you will help them. I don't know how it is in Norway, but here in the West, Arne, man must help each other. How would we survive otherwise? You are one of the strong ones, Arne, but there are many others

who aren't. You--why, you'd get along anywhere. And that's all that counts here--not money, or who your father was."

Arne did not answer, but Cal saw that he understood. In Arne's world, Cal knew, men did not talk about such things, but his voice, when he spoke, had lost its grudging tone.

"Look, Cal," he said softly, "Aren't they beautiful together?" They watched horse and rider lope back across the golden-white grass, Raneid's hair, one braid of which had come undone, flying behind her, the horse's white fore stockings flashing in perfect rhythm.

She reined in the horse before them, her eyes vividly blue in her flushed face. She dismounted quickly, before Cal could help her, in a flash of skirts and white petticoat, holding firmly to the mare's bridle, as she started to jump away. "None of that, now," she stroked the horse's neck soothingly, and the mare stood trembling. "Isn't she lovely? I will name her Freya, for the goddess of beauty. Unless," turning anxiously to Cal, "You have already named her?"

"No, I left that to you. Yes, Freya suits her, for she is a very vain lady, and requires many compliments." He rubbed the soft nose which was nibbling his

pockets for sugar. He had taken infinite pains with the training of this horse, for she must be perfect for Raneid, and now he felt a twinge of regret. He would miss her.

"I'd better go back to the sheep," Raneid said, swinging gracefully back into the saddle. "Thank you, Cal," she said, and for an instant one of her hands smoothing the shining neck, touched his where he held the reins.

"You are very welcome, Fru Mortenson," he said softly, and watched her ride away.

"Now Arne," he said, turning briskly to the other man who had resumed his hole digging. "I've really come about some business, too. Tommie wants to go home for awhile, and I don't relish the thought of herding sheep. I would like to spend the winter working a few horses at a time up into good saddle mounts. Then when spring comes, I'll sell them in Pierre on my way through. You said you wanted the sheep and the land. Why not take them now, and pay for them when you can? You would be doing me a favor if you could."

Arne finished the hole before he replied. Then he stuck the digger into the pile of dirt, and leaned on it, sighing. "There, that's the last one on this side. Ya, Cal, I will take the sheep now, and pay you

for it all too."

"But there's no need for that right now," Cal began. "Wait until the shearing, if you like. I don't need the money right now."

"No, if I take them now I pay for them, now."

Cal dared say nothing further. Arne must have money saved, or he would not have made the deal in the first place. Yet, as he rode toward home, he felt strangely heavy-hearted. Everything was settled as he wished, but he felt none of the eagerness he usually felt at the thought of new adventures, new places. In any case, it was too late now. Shrugging off his depression, he kicked Jubal into a gallop.

* * * * *

Raneid, that evening, felt happy for the first time in weeks. It had been exhilarating to gallop over the prairie on the fleet mare; for the first time she felt herself in control of the sheep. The prairie somehow did not seem so awesome from a different vantage point. She sat in her rocking chair after supper, knitting a mitten for Arne, humming a little as she rocked gently back and forth, her mind on nothing but whether to make the star point begin so high on the cuff or start it below the thumb. Arne, when he began to

speaking, took her entirely by surprise. He spoke long, and eloquently in Norwegian, and Raneid listened without moving, her hands idle on the knitting, her eyes fixed on his face.

"We will be rich some day, Raneid," he finished at last. "Rich! We can homestead on the section to the west. It is easy, we will build a shack, and since it will be in your name, you can sleep there sometimes, and with some improvements it is ours. With Cal's land that will be three sections--three sections! That is more than the richest farmer has in Norway. And every year we can increase the flock. Cal has three hundred, and with ours we will have a flock of five hundred. And the lambs yet to come. We will hire a herder, and lease more land from the government. Think of it, Raneid!"

"You have told Cal we will buy his sheep and land?" Raneid asked incredulously.

"We talked about it on the trip to Belle Fourche, and today I told him I would take the sheep now. He wants to stay until spring himself."

"But the money, Arne . . . where will this money to pay Cal come from? We do not have it."

"We have your dowry money, Raneid."

All the blood in her body seemed to rush to her

face with such force she thought she would burst. For a moment she struggled to get the words out, but could not think, idiotically, of the ones she wanted. She saw Arne looking at her anxiously.

"Raneid? We have saved it all this time, I know, planning to use it only for emergencies or some great need. But this is a great need, Raneid. We will never have such a chance as this."

"But there is an emergency," her voice came out strange to her ears, and so low that Arne leaned forward to hear.

"What emergency? What are you talking about, Raneid?" And when she did not answer, he put his hand on her arm. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm going to have a baby."

"But that's wonderful, Raneid!" his relief was so evident in his voice that she looked at him uncomprehendingly. Didn't he understand?

"But Raneid, dear," he said, and she flinched from the tenderness in his voice. "Babies don't cost that much, do they?"

"But I can't have a child here," Raneid burst out. "There is no one--I must go home, my mother . . . the dowry money is for that." She threw the mitten to the floor, jumped to her feet, and covering her face

with her hands, burst into tears.

"Listen, Raneid, little one," Arne said patiently, putting his arms around her. "Don't you think people in America know how to have babies? Mrs. Williams has had seven, the last three out here, with no doctor, only her husband and another woman. She has helped other women, too, she told me so."

Raneid pushed herself away until she could see into his face. "That dirty old woman? She cleans her toes while she kneads the bread. And did you see her house, her children? I don't want her to touch me."

"Yes, yes," Arne soothed her, patting her back like a balky child. "There is a doctor in Pierre, then, or the storekeeper's lady in Belle Fourche. We will find out what other ladies do. Don't let that trouble you."

"Arne," Raneid stepped back and faced him firmly, although she felt the sickness in her stomach spreading upward--that horrible nausea she had felt in the mornings lately. . . "That money is mine. My father gave it to me. He said it was for coming home for a visit, if I needed to."

"But not a visit yet, Raneid. We haven't been here six months. By the time it comes for a visit, we will have money of our own, if only we can buy this

land and more sheep. Don't you see, Ran? We will be rich, but we need the money to buy it, and there is no other."

"But the money, the dowry, will be all gone, and I will never go home again," Raneid began to cry again, hopelessly. She knew by the reasonable tone in Arne's voice that he had made up his mind. She wouldn't let him--it was hers . . . if only she didn't feel so sick.

"This is nonsense, Raneid. You mustn't get so upset, especially now. Of course you must have a doctor, but you can't go home yet. What would your parents think, a woman coming all the way from America to have her baby? Even your mother would laugh at you!"

"She wouldn't laugh," Raneid wiped away her tears with her apron, and stooped to pick up the mitten and tangled yarn. "She said I was to come home if I can't stand it, and I can't Arne. I hate it! I can't live here, and my baby can't either. The heat would kill it, or that dreadful wind. Arne, I'm sorry, but we must go back, or somewhere else, anywhere else . . . we can take the dowry money and buy a farm somewhere else, but not here, please, Arne."

"Now, Raneid, you are tired. You shouldn't have been riding that horse in your condition. Now you

must rest. Come, lie down now."

Raneid in one swift motion dropped to the floor, and flung her arms around his knees. She felt him flinch from the knitting needle, pressed against his leg. The nausea welled against her mouth, but she fought it down. "Arne, Arne, I beg of you, please, if you love me, take me from here. I cannot--cannot--stand it." She began to sob wildly against his trouser leg. "I can't live here, I will never live here."

She felt Arne's hands trying to pry her loose, but she held on with all her strength. He must promise, he must. She heard his voice from above her, beneath the pity, love, exasperation, the inexorable will. "Raneid, now listen. I promise you I will take you to some good woman, or a doctor, if any can be found, when your time comes. But it is impossible for you to go home now. You are not yourself--you must be reasonable. I will take care of you."

Raneid's arms dropped, and Arne stepped back, leaving her kneeling there on the floor at his feet. "You won't leave, or let me leave, then?"

"I can't leave, Raneid, nor can you. This is our home. It is what we dreamed of, you and I. Don't you remember how we planned it, there by the waterfall? We planned how we would come to America, and own our

own land. And you waited three years for me, while I went fishing off the Lofoten islands, until I was lucky and made a good catch. It's all as we've planned, Raneid!"

Raneid stood up, smoothed her apron, took it off and laid it over the back of her chair. Her face felt swollen, stiff, her mouth bruised, her legs trembled from the nausea. She could not look at him. "Yes, I remember Arne, but I did not realize--did not know that you would love it all more than me. And not even to ask me about the money. . ." she stumbled away on her drunken legs. "I'm going to bed now."

"I was wrong, Raneid," she heard his humble voice at her back, "wrong not to ask you, but I thought we shared everything--that the money was as much mine as yours."

She did not answer. All that mattered now was lying down, before that rising tide of sickness swept over her. She pulled her nightgown over her head and crept between the blankets, not bothering to unpin her braids. It was true, they had agreed to share everything, but she had not dreamed he would do anything she did not wish. It was true, but he did not love her as he had; how could he have changed so? They had always agreed about everything . . . it was this terrible land

that changed him. He had never been that way before.

NINE

The first week in November it turned cold although it did not snow. The wind whistled and shrieked out of a sullen grey sky, finding the minutest crack between the thick cottonwood logs of the house. Arne hunted down the cracks methodically, carrying his bucket of gumbo clay and chinking the outside while Raneid ran her hands over the inside of the logs and directed him to the cracks. His hands grew rough and red from the contact with the cold wet clay, but he persisted until the house was as warm as he could make it. Raneid spread her treasured braided rugs on the floor, and hung the wall weaving she had finished when she was seventeen and already planning to marry Arne. It depicted, against a bright blue background, Freya, the beautiful one, in her cat-drawn chariot, bearing with her, across the rainbow bridge, the Birvrost, a warrior fallen in battle, which she had chosen to take back with her to Asgard. Until now it had lain, carefully rolled, in the bottom of Raneid's dowry chest, for she had been somehow fearful that the hot dry air might harm the colors. But she needed it now, in the gray November days, and when she hung it on the wall it glowed with a

light of its own against the rough walls, like a fine painting.

Raneid had learned to weave from an old woman in the village, who had gladly taught her the ancient art, for most of the young girls no longer cared to learn. Arne had promised to make her a loom during the winter months, although she did not know where there would be room. Her father's farm had a room especially set aside for weaving, and the poorer people would come from miles around to buy the cloth. The old woman who taught Raneid worked there, and some of the other women who wished to make a little money, for they could keep all the money they made. It was one of the ways Raneid's mother had tried to help the people of the village, and the women, especially, to something more than a bare existence. Although the women did not make much, it was something else to depend on besides the fishing and the farming. Raneid's mother had insisted on their developing a pride in their village pattern and color, the deep lovely blue that most of Raneid's ordinary dresses were made from. In time this blue material, with its stylized geometric pattern became well-known even as far away as Bergen, for Raneid's grandparents, through their shipping business, sent the cloth all over the world. Still, although there were never enough

women to produce all the cloth that was wanted, Raneid saw how it had benefitted the women. They took pride in being able to clothe their own children, as their ancestors had always done, and they were proud to not entirely depend on their men. Raneid had even dreamed, how, in America, in some little farming community, she might even do the same thing; perhaps even the Indian women--but she no longer dreamed that dream.

With the colder weather, and the pasture finished, Arne, with Cal's help, turned to the butchering. The wether, the yearling lamb which Arne had tethered out all summer, was sacrificed first. Raneid knew how this would be done, and she stayed inside the house. Arne would cut his throat with his sharp knife, while Cal held the struggling animal stretched out on a block of wood. Raneid remembered the only time she had seen it as a little girl, but she had never forgotten the strange passionate look on her father's face as he drew his knife deep across the woolly throat. It had been more horrifying than the blood which spurted out, hot across her bare leg. Even now, the smell of the steaming liver and heart Arne brought in his bloody hands, made her retch and turn her face away. But she washed them in cold water, and later, the delicious taste of fresh meat overcame all her qualms. They were all starved for

it; Cal too had stayed to supper, and they ate until they could hold no more. The meat was hung in the barn loft to age, and beside it, a few days later, the carcass of the young pig. Now there would be meat until after Christmas when another butchering would be made, a larger one, for then some of the meat must be smoked and dried for the summer.

While this was going on, Raneid herded the sheep again, for of late Arne had taken over that task. She did not mind so much now, for the sheep did not wander so far as they had in the spring, seeming to feel the same instinct which kept Raneid close to the house. And besides, she had Freya to ride. Rushing along over the prairie on the fleet mare, she felt she had regained some amount of control over her life, some means of defense against the prairie. From the horse's back she could see the faint track running out of the Gumbo, toward Pierre, toward Belle Fourche, to civilization. Freya could take her there if she must go. It was not so impossible now.

She bided her time, for as the child grew inside her belly, she felt, strangely, as the sheep and other animals seemed to feel as their time drew near, the urge to go to nest, to burrow into lair and den, to shut out the bitter world. The morning sickness lessened,

and her appetite returned with the butchering. As near as she could tell, the child would be born in May. Sometime before that Arne would have to take her out, for she did not want to wait too late. She had tried at first, to abort the child, but nothing worked; she was too strong. She lifted impossible weights, wood, heavy scuttles full of coal; she rode Freya as fast and long as she could. She did this in sorrow and defiance of her mother's remembered teachings, for although her mother had been a midwife to many, she had always refused to help abort a child. "God sent it, surely," she would say, but Raneid did not believe this. Perhaps her mother's God had lived in Norway, he was not here. Raneid had always doubted her Mother's conception of God; she found it easy to ignore him here. Stronger, more powerful gods dwelt here, and only from them would she find help, if indeed it could be found. No, better to depend on herself. Defend herself against the evil Loki, and the trick he had played on her. There were those who were stronger than he, if only they would take pity on her. But in the meantime, she must plan; leave nothing to some god's whim. And besides, all during this bitter November, she was sure that Arne had not deserted her. He loved her still, beneath the absorption with his land; somehow, in the end he would

help her; she told herself this over and over. Wait a little, be patient, love him, she counseled herself.

But it was hard to wait, and as time went on Raneid's feeling toward her unborn child changed too. She no longer wanted to kill it, purge it from her body at whatever cost to herself. She began to accept the trick Loki and her own body had caught her in. When the child moved, fluttering in her womb like a frog held in the hand, she felt a strange wonder and sorrow, and a fierce protectiveness, not only toward that minute flutter of life, but toward herself. She would survive, and so would her child. She would be strong enough, her will would perservere.

She knew Arne though her resigned, and happy to see her, as he thought, more contented, he ceased watching her so closely. The intentness left his gaze; he turned his thoughts to the multitude of worries and projects which must be done before winter came. Raneid, perversely, was glad of this. She no longer wanted his undivided attention. She must be free to plan, to conserve her energy and will until she needed them. Thus she went about her daily tasks competently and for the most part happily. She knew she was merely pretending, most of the time, but in making Arne believe her pretense, she sometimes believed it herself. She drew herself in, and

Arne remarked the look in her eyes, the same, he told her, as that of breeding mares and cows and ewes, a veiled and dulled and waiting look.

She waited. She waited for Arne to mention the dowry money again, but the days went by, and he did not. She grew increasingly uneasy, for she knew Arne too well to suppose that he would so easily give up his plans for expanding the ranch. She knew that if he would not mention the subject, then she must, but somehow she kept finding excuses for putting off such a discussion, and it seemed to her that Arne ignored any opportunity to initiate it. They both had more leisure now, for almost all that could be done outside had been done. The butchering was over, the pasture finished, the house as warm as Arne could make it. Arne watched the sheep, but they too, did not range as far in the shortening days, and so he was often about the house, depending on Freya to carry him quickly to where the sheep were. On those afternoons he would sit with Raneid as she sewed or read or played her guitar, his hands always busy, braiding a new hackamore, or mending a harness. They talked of many things, guardedly, but neither mentioned the dowry money.

On one such grey, cold late November afternoon, Raneid sat alone, playing softly on her guitar all the

songs she knew, one after the other. She had done nothing else the whole afternoon, and her fingers ached with weariness, but she did not stop. Arne had ridden away on Freya right after lunch, saying he was going to visit Cal, and that he would be back sometime during the afternoon, and surely in time for supper. She did not question him. He would watch the sheep; that was all she cared about; as long as she did not have to go out into the sullen day. More and more she resented going out of the house, fearing what awaited her out there. It was fortunate, she thought, that her pregnancy gave her an excuse.

It was growing late; and several times she had risen and looked out the door to see if he was coming. If he did not come soon, she must milk the cow, and she did not want to do that, as Arne had taken over that chore as well. She washed potatoes and coated them with grease; put them into the oven, beside the roast Arne had cut from the pork that morning. The smell of the cooking food made her realize that she was hungry, but she ignored the rumbling of her stomach and picked up her guitar again. She was eating too much, she would become fat, and her pregnancy hardly showed yet. She had seen how some women, after the birth of their first baby, never looked slim again, but her mother had

said there was no excuse for that, and certainly she herself had been a good example. Even after five of them she remained as slender and straight as a young girl. A miracle, people said, but Mother always laughed at this. "A little willpower is all one needs," she would tell Raneid, about that, and about so many other things . . . a little willpower . . .

The thought of her mother brought tears to Raneid's eyes. On afternoons like this in Norway, how many times they had all sat together in the cozy kitchen in front of the fireplace, drinking coffee and talking together. Sometimes there would be visitors, women asking her mother's advice on all sorts of affairs, for her mother was well known for her wisdom and learning, as well as her kindness. Sometimes it would be only Raneid, working at her lessons, for even after leaving school, her mother had made Raneid continue her lessons in English and all the other things she thought Raneid should know. In the late afternoon the noisy little boys would troop in from school in the village, chattering and slinging their books and jackets onto the table, until Raneid made them hang them where they belonged, and settled them down before the fire for hot coffee with milk in it, and some cookies fresh from the oven. Then they would all rush out to help Father, Raneid

too, impatient to be out in the cold air after the closeness of the fire. And after the chores were done, the welcome lamplight streaming through the window, beckoning them in to supper and the warm close fire . . .

Raneid wiped the tears off the guitar with her apron and went to the door again to see if Arne was coming. She could not see him, but she could see the first of the sheep streaming down the hill toward the river, on their way, too, to shed and corral. She stood watching them in the open door, unmindful of the cold air. She loved to watch them come home like this, trailing down the hill, one behind the other, treading the same path they had walked the night before, and the night before that, long thin gray lines winding down the hill like threads unrolling from a spool. There were always three lines, and the same leaders were always in front. Only the lambs as usual distained the assigned order and cavorted alongside, rushing in a troop to the very steepest part of the hill, the clayey bank overhanging the river. They ran along this, defying gravity, hanging, it seemed, by their sharp little hooves, carried by their momentum to the other side, then turning and rushing back faster than before. Raneid held her breath, expecting, as always, to see one fall, but again they were safely across.

The leaders had reached the river crossing, and Raneid, suddenly realizing she was cold, began to swing the door shut, knowing that all the sheep were now on the hill, and Arne would surely come soon. She stopped, straining her eyes, for over the edge of the hill came a fresh surge of sheep, not orderly, and not in lines, but bunched together as if they were being driven. Her first thought was that somehow Cal's bunch had mixed with theirs, and impulsively she laid down her guitar, and snatched her jacket off the hook beside the door. Maybe there was still time to head them off. One arm in the jacket sleeve, she paused, staring, for behind the sheep now appeared the figure of two horsemen. Freya and Arne she recognized instantly, and a few moments later, Cal and his grey horse. Driving the sheep! Driving . . . on purpose, mixing them . . . all one bunch . . . theirs.

"No!" she screamed, but no one heard above the bleating of the sheep. She turned, leaving the door still open, and ran into the little bedroom. Trembling, she knelt beside the chest at the end of the bed . . . her dowry chest . . . and lifted the lid. Blind, her fingers knew exactly where to look, and looked but did not find. Frantically, as the mist of terror cleared from her eyes, she pulled out the blankets, skeins of

yarn, homespun material, flinging them on the floor in her useless search. Useless, for she knew the packet was gone--her dowry money gone--the little packet done up so carefully in oilskin, full of crisp new American bills which her father had put there, made a special trip to Bergen to the bank, to exchange his Kroner for money she could use in America . . . gone. And she knew exactly how and why. Arne had taken her money and bought Cal's sheep with them.

Her heart filled like a balloon with air, filled her whole chest and pushed up into her throat, and made her retch; rose into her head and pressed against the backs of her eyes until she could not see. She struggled for breath, to scream out the desolation and terror and anger which filled her, but she could not speak, nor move. She stayed where she was on the floor, holding tight to the carved wooden handles of the chest, knowing that if she held on tight enough she would not be swept away into that dizzy vastness. A question of willpower, her mother's voice said in her ear, and slowly her vision returned, and the roaring left her ears. She heard the sound of her panting, and her breath rasping in and out, and deliberately she slowed her breathing, stilled the pounding of her heart. She did not move until she heard the sound of men's voices coming

up the walk, heard Arne say in a loud, cheerful voice:

"What the devil? What's the door open for, Raneid?

Raneid, you here? Hey, Ran!"

She looked up. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, looking through the pulled aside curtain to where she knelt amidst the tumbled contents of the chest. For a second they stared at each other, then behind him Cal appeared, looking puzzled, saying, also cheerfully, "Hello, Raneid!" Then uncertainly looking at Arne, when she neither moved nor spoke.

A second that lasted forever; then Arne crossed the floor in two quick strides, and jerked the curtain down. "Raneid's not feeling too well these days," she heard him say to Cal, and Cal's embarrassed murmurings. "No, have some coffee first, man." And then Cal's insisting he must leave, and then, for a long time, silence, after the closing of the door.

She knew that Arne was there in the door again, looking at her but she did not lift her head. The wooden handles still sustained her; she knew that if she loosened her grip on them she would sink to the floor and never again get up. So she stayed here on her knees, only dimly aware, as if she were listening to another person tell of it, of the pain of the ridges in the rug against them. The roaring in her ears had subsided, but it seemed

to have left her hearing dulled; his voice came to her from a great distance, although now he was sitting on the edge of the bed looking into her face.

"Listen to me, Raneid. Look at me, girl! I had to take it, Raneid. It was the only way we could buy those sheep, and they're ours now, Ran. And Cal's land. We're rich, Raneid, the biggest and richest ranchers in the Gumbo. Ran, listen." He had slipped to his knees beside her now, alarmed at last by her stony stillness. He put an arm around her rigid back, tried to loosen her grip on the polished wood. "Come now, Ran. Rise up, let's have supper and celebrate."

She could smell his breath on her cheek, the smell of the whiskey he and Cal must have been drinking all afternoon to celebrate their bargain. At last she turned her head and looked him in the face so close to hers. His eyes were that bright glassy blue they appeared when he had been drinking too much, his face was flushed with the liquor and the cold wind. Against his vivid face the golden eyebrows and mustache shone, each hair vibrantly alive. She looked at him as closely as though she were meeting him for the first time.

Arne, mistaking the flicker of interest in her eyes, pulled her to him and kissed her on the mouth. She did not move, nor turn her head but her lips were still

and cold. "Well!" he said uncertainly, getting to his feet, and trying to draw her up, "Well! What do you say, Raneid?"

Still on her knees, Raneid began mechanically to smooth and fold the contents of the dowry chest, tumbled about her, to fold neatly and put back into the chest her marriage linens. Arne sat down on the bed again.

"You took my dowry money." Her voice crept out of her rusty throat.

Arne's smile dimmed, but did not quite vanish; somehow, subtly, shading into a grimace of shame. He looked down at his big hands, resting on his knees. "I know, Ran, and I'm sorry, I ask your pardon," he said softly. "I had to do it though, you forced me to it. You wouldn't have let me have it, you know you wouldn't."

"You stole it."

"Not stolen, Raneid. What is yours is mine, isn't it, and mine yours? We always said that you know."

"But we were to agree," Raneid said in the same dim voice. "Not to just take . . . and to take that . . . that money, that my father gave me." That money, she wanted to say, that money that was to save me.

"Now, we talked about that the other night, Ran,"

A new firmness crept into Arne's voice. Raneid knew how this would end; first the patience, then finally, the anger when she did not bend. As she would not. "We talked about it, and I said we needed those sheep and Cal's land, if we are ever to become rich, we must have them."

"We talked, yes, but we did not agree, and I told you . . ." Raneid's voice, despite herself, began to rise . . . "I told you I wanted the money, for the child, to go to Norway, back home. And it was mine," Raneid concluded simply, "to do with what I wanted."

"Raneid!" Angry, now, as she had known he would be, he jumped to his feet, "By god, girl, we're married, and that money was as much mine as yours. Here in America, you know, they don't let women run everything. By god, a man has to decide sometimes what's the best for us all! And I decided!" he ended a little lamely.

Raneid did not answer. The anger she had felt building inside had leaked away, not because she knew he was right, but because he was wrong, and most of all no anger could stand beside the awful realization of what they had done to each other. She picked up the last blanket, folded it neatly, and tucked it down around the top of the chest, and pulled the lid down. Then at last she stood up, painfully, for her knees

were almost too numb to hold her, and faced him.

"You will never leave here."

He shook his head.

"You will not even think about taking land somewhere else, east of the river?"

Again he shook his head, and then, to soften the harshness of his refusal, tried again, patiently, once more to make her understand.

"We are settled here, Raneid, the buildings are up, we have the sheep, the land; why begin all over? We have all I ever wanted, right here."

"All you want, Arne, but not all I want. I love you Arne, you are my husband, but don't you see, I cannot live here, cannot be happy, ever. There is an evil here, which will drive me out, I tell you. I cannot bear it!" Her voice rose, and she stopped for a moment, for she did not want to lose control, now, of all times. "It's ugly, ugly. I can bear the loneliness, but not the ugliness; never to have anything beautiful, to look at, or touch, or feel. To fear the wind the rest of my life . . . Arne, I'm afraid. It will be too much for me."

"Du vesle," Arne said tenderly pulling her into his arms, "you little one . . . you are afraid, with your Arne here? Didn't I promise you I'd take care of

you? What is there to fear? Soon you will have the child, and you will be too busy to be lonely. And there will be money, soon, to take little trips, and buy things to make life more beautiful. Think, Raneid, how we planned and dreamed and saved in order to come here. You wanted it as much as I. It is only your imagination, Raneid, you have often said yourself that it influences you too much. Forgive me for taking your money, and help me with this Ran, as we always planned . . . we must do it together."

He stroked her rigid back, patting it clumsily with his rough hand, and she stood upright within his encircling arms, neither responding nor drawing away, and listened to the words she could not say, crashing and tumbling and sliding into one another in her head like huge unwieldy blocks of ice: "But it wasn't what I thought . . . not what I thought. . . and I can never, ever forgive you, Arne."

TEN

Cal never forgot, during the rest of his long life, the sight of Raneid, kneeling among the scattered contents of her dowry chest, the look on her face akin to that which he'd seen the day of the storm; a human being driven to the boundaries of endurance. He had

known instantly what had happened, for Arne had told him frankly that it was Raneid's dowry money, but what he had not told him was that Raneid did not know of it. If he had known that this was the situation, he would not, of course have taken it, for Cal had very little regard for money, having always had it. He would have insisted Arne pay him in installments; or refused to sell the land and sheep to him, anything other than be the cause of that look on Raneid's face.

He galloped home so upset he could not eat the supper Tommie had prepared, and instead sat up half the night finishing the bottle he and Arne had begun. Whiskey always improved his thinking, and in the course of that night, he made a dozen plans for rescuing Raneid, or somehow making the situation more bearable for her.

He could offer her money, give back to her her dowry money, without Arne's knowledge. But in doing this he would be coming between a man and his wife, and even aiding a wife to desert her husband, for he had no doubt as to the ultimate use of the dowry money. He had seen Raneid's unhappiness increase as the fall drew on, and he sympathized with her feeling. After all, wasn't he about to leave, and wasn't it for very similar, if not identical, reasons that Raneid wished to leave? He felt something of the horror at the

bleakness of the prairie that Raneid felt, and knew that she felt it, although they had never discussed it. She would never be happy here, and he knew it, and he felt himself to blame for a good part of it. He had enticed them out here, partly, he now realized, because of the very loneliness and dread that Raneid felt; therefore, part of the responsibility was his, but what part, and how far would his responsibility permit him to interfere between those two?

Interfering would cause him, at the very least, Arne's friendship, Cal knew. He had tried to encourage Arne to move to a more hospitable land, but he had seen too, the strength of Arne's will and determination. No power on earth, he felt, would move that man from his appointed place on earth. Appointed by Cal Willard, but that made no difference to Arne. Destiny in the shape of Cal Willard, and now Raneid must pay for it. And then too, his liking for the man, his admiration for that very will and strength, that Cal knew he did not have, did not have, and to be truthful, did not care much to have. Yet there it was, and it was an admirable thing in a man, something his own father no doubt wished fervently Cal had. Yes, he liked and admired Arne Mortenson, felt in almost equal weight with his desire to help Raneid his desire to help Arne, and

retain his friendship.

He knew, as the night wore on, that he could not have both. He must choose between them, for he knew that they were inalterably opposed. Whether to leave matters as they were and sacrifice Raneid's happiness, if not worse, to Arne's friendship and his sense of duty, was, he realized, the easier way out. But what of Raneid? Surely he had a duty there too, and a bond as strong as that to Arne, stronger, even, if he would admit, and God damn it to hell, he would, that he loved her. And what kind of man would see the woman he loved so miserably unhappy? In her way she was as stubborn as Arne, or perhaps not stubborn, but unable to change. He knew as well as he knew Arne's inalterable will, that Raneid also could not alter herself.

It did no good to wish that he had never seen the Mortensons on that train, or at least had had the sense to ignore them. But some demon, his evil genius for involving himself with people, and especially pretty women, had driven him on, although at every step of the way he had cursed himself for a fool. Of course he had known better. He had even then been thinking of selling the ranch. What in God's name had possessed him to talk to them as if he intended to spend the rest of

his days in the Gumbo? A weak meddling fool . . . the old man was right . . . well, by God, if this didn't teach him!

He got up to put another piece of coal on the fire, and open another bottle, ignoring the cold supper Tommie had hopefully left for him. Food would dull his wits and he needed every ounce he possessed tonight.

There were so many intangibles to consider. Suppose he took Raneid away, and sent her back to Norway, or better still took her to his own home. Could she be induced to divorce Arne, and would this even be possible without a return to Norway? Maybe Arne would absolutely refuse, and what of Raneid herself? He had never doubted she loved Arne, and there was no reason at all to think she could learn to love him. But even so, he must help her reach Norway, if there was no other way, and perhaps, eventually, she might return to Arne. He would not think of that wonderful possibility of someday having Raneid for his wife. He would do exactly as she wished, and she would never know, until the time was right, how he felt about her. But in the meantime there were a few things he could try before that last desperate attempt, and he went to bed determined to do them.

In the morning he sent a note with Tommie, who

was stopping by on his way home to say goodbye to the Mortensons, addressed to Arne, suggesting that Raneid be encouraged to go along for a visit to the Williamses. Arne had mentioned before that he felt a visit to them might do Raneid good, and so Cal felt safe in suggesting it. Then, too, the weather might turn bad, it was likely this time of year, and Raneid's visit might be extended to several weeks before he or Arne could fetch her. At least she would have a change of scene and company. The loneliness might do Arne good too; at least it was worth trying.

A few days later he rode hopefully over to the Mortensons, ostensibly to see how the sheep were adjusting but in reality to see if his scheme had worked. As he rode down the trail above the river, he saw the enlarged herd grazing to the south, and on one side, Freya grazing on a picket. No one else was to be seen, and Cal swore at the sight of the mare, for he knew Raneid would have ridden her had she gone with Tommie. Nevertheless, he rode on to the ranch and dismounted at the barn, tying his horse in an empty stall, as he always did, and loosening the saddle girth before he went into the house.

Raneid opened the door for him. "Takk for Sidst," Cal said as he usually did when greeting her. "Thanks for last time." His Norwegian was a joke between them,

for he was always trying to improve it, and Raneid always teased him about it.

She did not smile today, however, and he put aside the Norwegian with his hat. "Well, Raneid, I came to see if you were home still. I thought perhaps you might be making a little visit."

"No. I did not want to go," Raneid said softly, but Cal saw the red rimmed eyes and the violet shadows beneath her eyes.

"The wind is cold today," he said turning briskly to the stove and warming his hands above the lid. "Any coffee in that pot, Raneid?"

"There is always coffee." She took a cup from the cupboard and poured it full, and her own empty cup as well. "And some cookies." She put them on a plate and they sat down at the kitchen table.

Raneid sat facing the window and Cal looked at her as intently as he dared. Her face was different, somehow, a little fuller, and the summer's tan had faded into the translucent white he remembered so well. The little blue veins showed at her temples, and the eyes, normally so blue, looked smudged and darkened. She looked, not less beautiful, but less young, or only maybe more tired. Cal noticed with a sense of shock that the high collar of her waist had a spot on it, and a slight tinge of

grey showed around the rim where it encircled her neck. He would not have noticed it probably, on anyone else, but on Raneid, who had always been so fastidious, who after three days on a dirty lurching immigrant train had still appeared spotless, it seemed to be magnified out of all proportion, and wherever he looked, his eyes turned back to that spot. Desperately, he reached for a cookie, and kept his eyes on his coffee cup.

Raneid did not appear to notice. He had always found it easy to talk with Raneid, and on a greater range of subjects than with most women, whose sensibilities constantly had to be watched. Cal never forgot Raneid was a woman; rather he delighted in the wide ranging of her mind that her beauty seemed to enhance, rather than distract. Today, however, she seemed reluctant to talk, or, Cal thought uneasily, she was angry about the money.

He put down the coffee cup, empty, and watched Raneid fill it again. Then he said resolutely; "Raneid, I am sorry about your money. I did not realize it was against your wishes that Arne gave it to me."

Raneid's hand, holding the coffee pot poised over the cup, began to shake, and although Cal could not look at her face, he knew she was flushed. He could feel the angry warmth emanating from her. Silently she

turned away and replaced the pot upon the stove. Cal waited, but Raneid still stood with her back to him, her head bent.

"Raneid?" Cal said at last, uneasily. "I'm truly sorry. You must think I am prying, but I only want to help you. I've seen . . . I've sensed that you aren't happy here, and you probably wanted to save that money for yourself. And . . . and Arne has told me about the child."

He stopped. He was doing it badly, and what if he were wrong? She would never forgive him.

To his great relief, she turned and faced him, her head up, proudly ignoring the tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry too, Cal. You must think of me . . . that I am not a good pioneer woman, not a good wife to Arne. But . . . but the money was mine, and I told him I wanted it to go home to Norway when the time came. I thought he understood. Then he took the money without saying anything to me, and bought the sheep and the land. I cannot forgive him for that."

"I did not know . . ."

"You knew I did not like it here, Cal. We talked of this before." She sighed. "Sometimes I blame you for bringing us here, but if not you, it would have been someone else. And you have been so good to us."

Without you we could not have done all that we have . . . don't think we are not grateful, Cal. It's only this place . . . this dreadful prairie . . . anywhere else, with neighbors and trees, and hills, I would have been happy, I promise you Cal. I am not such a coward, truly. But here, how can I explain . . ." She put her apron to her cheeks to wipe the tears from them.

"Go ahead, Raneid," Cal said gently. "You don't know how I blame myself . . . I will do anything, anything to help you."

"How can you help me?" Raneid said drearily. "It is too late now. The money is gone, and anyway, Arne would never let me go. He does not understand that I must leave here. And he is so stubborn. Once he has decided something, it is useless to try to change him. He is different since he has this accursed land. He will not even listen to me. He is a man possessed."

Cal thought with relief, Then it is all settled, I need say nothing more. I have done all I could, honorably, and now I must leave it up to them. No one would expect more of me. I can leave with a clear conscience. He drained the last of his coffee, and was about to rise, when Raneid went on.

"See! It is snowing. I felt this morning when I threw out the dish water that it would snow today,

and now it is. Oh, I was hoping it would not snow for awhile. What will happen now, Cal?" She got up and went quickly to the window, so agitated that Cal rose automatically with her, as alarmed as she.

He stood behind her at the window and over her head he saw the snow cloud sweeping on the wind toward them, trailing long white fingers across the prairie to the north, leaving it white wherever it touched. An instant later and the cloud enveloped them, flinging snow against the pane as though it were trying to force an entry; the wind rattling the glass and shrieking insanelly around the corner of the house. They both felt its breath through the crack under the window. Raneid shrank back against him as from a mortal enemy, and Cal instinctively put his arm around her.

"It's all right, Raneid," he soothed. "We're safe and snug in here. You must get used to the snow and the wind . . . this is only the first of many storms."

"I know, I know," Raneid moaned, and turning, clung like a child to Cal, her arms around his waist. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to put his other arm around her, to press his lips against her hair.

"I can't stand it, Cal. I can't. Arne is wrong

to make me stay, and I won't. I am not a cow or a sheep. In Norway he listened to me, but now I am nothing to him. I cannot live here, and I will not. I will save my child and myself too. You understand Cal. How it will be year after year--this terrible sameness."

"Yes, yes," Cal said, to stop that dreadful voice. "You know how Arne loves you, Raneid. . . ." but it was true, Arne did not understand her, and never would, in his blind stubbornness.

"Not like he did," Raneid did not release him. "No, he loves that land better now than he does me, the sheep better even." Her English was deserting her, and half the words were in Norwegian, but Cal understood. He understood that he could not desert her too, for she was too much like himself. Hadn't he dragged her out here because he needed something beautiful too, in this ugly country, to try to convince himself it was worth working and struggling for? But like Raneid, it had not been enough, and now wasn't he leaving for that very reason she was? To desert her would be to deny himself his own reasons, and besides all that, the simplest reason of all, that he loved her. He could smell her hair against his nose, the warmth that rose from her, scented with her body smell, the smell of woman,

and her smell in particular. Her waist and back under his arms felt firm and yet soft, as he had imagined they would. The pregnancy had not yet touched her body. He felt his blood thundering in his head, and he calmed himself with all the will power he could gather. It would be the basest possible thing to take advantage of her weakness now.

"Listen Raneid," he held her away from him, but did not release his hold on her. "Your dowry money is safe with me, and I consider it yours. I will merely keep it for you until you need it, and I will help you when you are ready. I can leave anytime, and I will take you wherever you wish to go."

"Cal . . . you will?" Raneid's eyes were full of tears, and Cal, moved more than he cared to let her know, pulled her head against his chest, and hugged her gently. "You decide, when and where, and about Arne . . . it is all up to you. But do you think Arne? . . ."

As if his name had conjured him up, Cal heard his step on the porch outside, the same moment Raneid did. They had barely time to step back from each other when Arne entered the kitchen, stamping the snow from his boots, and shaking himself like a hairy golden pony. Snow covered his mustache, and the ends of hair sticking out of his stocking cap; his cheeks were

brilliantly red. He hesitated a moment before he spoke, and Cal was never sure, then or later, if he had seen them in each other's arms. At the moment it did not seem so, for he greeted Cal with his usual ease, and Raneid turned immediately to the cupboard to fetch a cup and busied herself pouring Arne some coffee, and refilling their cups which still stood on the table.

"We were watching the storm come," Cal said a little awkwardly to Arne. "It really blew in fast, didn't it? Need any help with the sheep?"

"Tak, Cal, but I headed them toward the bluff just before the storm, and I think they will stay there, out of the wind. That wind is a devil, though."

"I'm glad you have them now, instead of me, Arne," Cal said jokingly and stopped embarrassed. Raneid did not seem to have heard but put more cookies on the plate and ordered the men to sit and eat. Cal marveled at her. Not a sign showed on her calm lovely face that a moment before she had been in tears and near hysteria. Cal wished almost that she would say something to Arne, or that he had the courage to, of what they had been talking about. Even now, perhaps, he could persuade Arne, convince him somehow that Raneid's health, if not more, depended on him allowing her to leave. But the moment passed, and it was too late.

As they sat over their coffee, the wind outside shrieked louder and louder, increasing from gusts that rattled the windows to a steady howl that seemed to lean irresistibly against the house. Catching one of Raneid's apprehensive glances at the window, Arne laughed. "Never fear, Raneid. That wind can't blow this house down. An old sailor knows how to use the wind."

"But see, Arne," Raneid said in a trembling voice, "See how the snow comes down. It is snowing harder than it was."

"You're right, Raneid." Cal got up and looked apprehensively out the window. "I'm afraid we're in for a good old Dakota blizzard. It was too warm this morning. I should have been suspicious. We'd better see to the sheep, Arne."

Arne was already pulling on his coat. "We'll leave the horses in the barn," he said decisively. "They'll be no use in a storm like this. The sheep aren't far, if we can get them to the shed."

If we can get them, Cal thought to himself as he followed Cal out the door, marveling at his command of the situation. Arne, no doubt, was used to emergencies, and after all, a sailor on the seas in a storm is similar

to a rancher on the prairie. Still Cal admired his coolness. A blizzard, to the inexperienced, certainly is a terrifying thing, but here was Arne, as calm as if it were a summer day.

"Stay in the house, Raneid, and don't worry about us," Arne called back through the door. "It might take us awhile."

"Arne, be careful," Raneid ran to shut the door, and the last glimpse Cal had of her before he was out in the storm was her white agonized face between the two edges of the door.

"God, look at that," Arne shouted exultantly, and then they were in the swirling whiteness, all sounds lost save the shrieking of the wind. Cal lurched toward Arne and grabbed him by the arm, suddenly panic-stricken at the thought of being left alone in this mad whiteness. "Rope," he shouted into Arne's ear. "Tie us together."

Arne nodded. He had understood. He pointed toward the barn looming grayly in front of them, and together they ran for it. Arne pulled the door open, and they tumbled into the warm quiet dimness.

"Whew!" Arne shook himself like a huge dog coming out of water. "Rope right here, Cal," and he took a length of rope from the wall. "Better tie that

scarf tighter," he said looking critically at Cal, and Cal obediently did so. From the moment they had stepped out the door Arne had been in control, and Cal half-resenting his air of authority, nevertheless was glad to rely on him. They quickly unsaddled and unbridled the horses, filling the manger full of hay. The cow was standing in her stanchion munching at her portion, and Arne closed the little door that led into the corral.

"All snug now, Cal," he tied one end of the rope about each of their wrists." We can follow the fence down to the corner, then it is just to the river bluff, if we can keep a straight course. We might make it, if it doesn't snow harder than this."

They were out in the storm again, and Cal saw that the wind, while blowing as hard as ever, was no worse. The saving thing, he thought, might be the fact that there had been no snow on the ground, to be caught up in the raging wind, blurring everything to the same whiteness, where it was impossible to tell, after awhile, what was up or down. At least the ground was still brown enough to give some perspective and direction, and if it did not snow harder than this, all might yet be well. Cal cursed under his breath. He had no wish to die a martyr with a bunch of sheep, and

he had heard too many stories of blizzards to feel comfortable; of men found, frozen into grotesque shapes, days after the storm. In the past winters he had always stayed out of storms, and perhaps he had been lucky; the winters, they said, had been mild. Yet here he was, blundering through a blizzard with a greenhorn, a man who had never in his life seen a Dakota blizzard. My God, thought Cal, what will happen to Raneid if we both die out here. Then there was no time to think anymore, for he was stumbling along after Arne, in the direction, he hoped, of the bluff. They had left the fence line now, and Arne moved confidently forward, one arm shielding his face from the wind. It was blowing now from the east, directly into their faces, but Cal was glad of this. It meant, if the wind held steady, that it would be at their backs bringing the sheep in. The sheep would never face the wind--it would be impossible to drive them into it. And perhaps--he could not help hoping--this was only a squall. Any minute now it might blow over, and the icy blue sky would suddenly emerge. He knew he was deluding himself, but still he clung to the thought.

Cal was glad enough to be sheltered behind Arne's broad back; but even so, with Arne taking the brunt of the wind, the cold clawed under his cap, making

his scalp ache with pain. He was thankful for the scarf Raneid had thrust at him as he went out the door. Without it, he knew, his cheeks and nose would be white with frostbite. It made it seem warmer to know that she had knit it, and he breathed through it gratefully, trying to catch the scent of her on the wool.

The rope around his wrist jerked him painfully, as he stumbled and almost went down. Damned fool, he muttered, angry with himself. It was demoralizing, somehow, to be towed along behind Arne like a balky horse. . . he who had always been the leader, the knowledgeable advisor. Well, some men were fitted to this kind of life and some weren't. Arne was just a damn born Dakota rancher, and he, Cal, damn well wasn't.

After what seemed like hours to Cal, the force of the wind dramatically diminished and he could dimly discern, from his wind-burned eyes, the gray mass of sheep on his right. They had reached the bluff. Arne, however, did not stop until they were well under the lee of it, out of the wind, and in the midst of the sheep, huddled into a dirty-gray mass, heads in and tails out.

The bluff actually was only a high cut bank, worn countless eons ago by the river that now ran several

hundred feet to the west of it. The river pot holes had been dry most of the fall, with the exception of a few springs that flowed, more or less sluggishly, all year round. The biggest one Arne had planned to keep open for the sheep to drink from, but now it was impossible to tell where the holes were through the swirling snow. Here in the lee of the bluff it was calm, although the air was full of fine particles of snow, as if the air itself had taken visible form.

"Whew!" Arne stopped at last, panting, and turned to face Cal. His eyes were bright blue, bluer than his blue scarf which he had wrapped to his eyes, and around the top of his head, over his cap. Only the bright eyes and the shaggy golden brows, frosted with snow, showed. His voice came out muffled through the frosted circle on his scarf where his mouth was. "You okay?"

"Yes." Cal's own voice sounded frozen to him, as if to talk might splinter the words into ice. "Some blizzard! If that wind holds steady . . ." Arne nodded. "Where's Oskar?"

"I think he went back," Cal said guiltily. He had in truth seen the dog turn tail and run back to the house, but he had not had the heart to call him back. Most likely he wouldn't have come back in any

case.

"Damn! It will be hard work getting them to move without him, but I think we'll have to try it, don't you Cal?"

Hearing the note of indecision for the first time in Arne's voice, Cal felt a little of his own confidence returning, although he could not have said why. "This might last for days," he said. "If we can get them to the shed, we can feed them at any rate, and they'll have more protection. If the wind switched, and chases them out of here, they'll pile up for sure."

"You're right, Cal. Well, if you're ready, I am. All we have to do is keep them headed with the wind at our backs, and we're okay. You take this side, and I'll take the other. Stay close, now," and the next instant he was gone into the blinding whiteness. Cal could hear his voice, blending with the keening wind, as he urged the sheep to move.

It was hard work. The sheep stubbornly refused to move at first, burrowing into their collective mass with their heads, and ignoring the shouts and blows Cal directed at them. Cal began to sweat under his heavy sheepskin coat; he felt drops of sweat running from his armpits and along his ribs. Better keep moving, he thought. Catch pneumonia in this damn wind. Nothing

stubborner than a damn sheep. What in hell did I ever get mixed up with them for. Stupidest thing I ever did . . . learned my lesson now, though . . . if I ever get out of here . . . Get going, you bastard! and he kicked with all his strength at a fat ewe who obstinately refused to move a foot. The kick only sent her deeper into the solid huddle of sheep. Cal pounded on her back with his fists, yelling all the obscenities he could think of. He stopped, panting and ashamed, when he felt the mass give, and move a little away from him. But it was not his pounding and yelling that was doing it. For a brief instant the wind swept the snow aside and Cal saw Arne at the west end of the knot of sheep, patiently pulling out the leaders one by one and pointing them toward the corrals. Of course, it was the only thing to do, and Cal, contrite, worked his way along the edge, pulling the sheep out, and sending them after the leaders. The rest of the sheep, feeling the others leave, bleated in panic, and pulled their heads out, each following blindly its neighbor. Once started, they needed no further urging; they went with the wind at their backs for the corral, Arne on one side and Cal the other to keep them straight. It would have been impossible, Cal realized, if the wind had been from the west, but as it was, they were lucky. Gratefully,

he too turned his back to the wind, and plowed along through the deepening, drifting snow.

It might have been an hour, or two hours; Cal had no idea of the time, before they reached the corral. It was snowing heavier now, and the wind had settled to a steady whine. The light, too, had darkened, but whether from the lateness of the day, or the thickening of the storm, Cal could not tell. What time had they left the house? He could not remember. It had been before noon, for he remembered looking at his watch before he left his house--it had been ten then, and he and Raneid hadn't talked long before Arne came. Well, it didn't make any difference. He couldn't go home until the storm lifted, and sometimes they lasted three days or more. Who knew what would happen in three days, shut up all together in that little house? It was his own fault; if he hadn't been such a sentimental fool he would have been out of the whole mess by now.

The sheep were funneling through the gate, and Cal swung it shut behind them with a sigh of relief. They would be all right now, if the hay lasted. Thank god they had put up what they did, even though he had thought it silly of Arne to insist on that much. He'd hardly fed at all for the three winters he had been here, but this one might be different, he thought uneasily. It

was starting early enough, and with too much snow even the wind couldn't keep it swept clear enough to graze. Following Arne's snow-blurred bulk, he stumbled wearily through the snow to the house.

He was so cold that he could not feel the warmth of the air inside the kitchen, but the strong, rich smell of meat boiling--mutton--on the stove assailed him almost physically. He realized that he was terribly hungry. He had had something to eat this morning, sometime, but now, as his eyes warmed and he could focus them, he saw by the wooden clock on the wall that it was three o'clock. He pulled off his stiff mittens and held his numb fingers over the hot stove. Raneid was unwinding Arne's scarf; the knot was frozen and crusted with snow and would not come undone. He saw her pale face and swollen eyelids downturned as she worked at the knot. Had she been crying? Intent on the scarf she would not look at him. The heat made his fingers sting painfully and he shook them to alleviate the pain. The gesture sent snow sizzling on the hot stove, and he realized that his face was beginning to melt too. His mustache and eyebrows were crusted with ice. His eyes watered with the pain of pulling off the chunks of ice, but the icy water was soaking uncomfortably into the depth of his mustache. He pulled off his cap and

scarf, which was frozen into the shape of his chin and mouth in front, and laid them in the wood box. The leather of his sheepskin coat was white, snow pounded into it like flour into meat. He shrugged out of it and hung it on the coat pegs along the wall, where it began to drip.

Raneid had finished unwinding Arne from his scarf, pulled his mittens from his hands, and undid his coat, all the time making pitying little noises. Arne submitted to these ministrations with an air of indulgent patience. He did not seem cold or even tired, thought Cal. He was only indulging Raneid. But at last he had enough. "Don't carry on so, woman," he said. "Nothing has happened; the sheep are all right. All part of a rancher's life, eh, Cal?"

"I guess so," Cal said, and Arne laughed at his uncertain tone. His good humor annoyed Cal. "That meat smells good, Raneid," he said to her.

"A little exercise whets the appetite," Arne joked. "Let's have some of it, Ran. I could eat it all myself. The devil! It's three o'clock. No surprise that we're hungry, then."

Cal laughed at Arne's choice of words. His English, though sometimes unexpected, usually had a fresh and vivid quality that Cal thought very attractive. Arne laughed too, although he did not see the reason, and poured

himself and Cal a cup of coffee, while Raneid hurried to set the table. She had made dumplings, she explained to Arne, because whe was afraid to go to the root cellar after potatoes. "Innbakt Frukt," Arne exclaimed, pleased, and Raneid flushed with pleasure. The dumplings were delicious, fluffy and even textured, piled on top of the steaming mutton and carrot stew. Cal thought he had never eaten anything so good and told Raneid so. "Bachelors don't eat many meals like this, I can tell you." He leaned back, sated, and filled his pipe, waiting politely to light it until Arne was finished. He always ate twice as much as Cal, but he finished at last, and pushed back his plate. "Tak, Ran," he said, as he always did, a custom that Cal found touching. Raneid took away their plates and refilled the coffee cups. Cal felt a great sense of contentment washing over him; full, warm, comfortable within and without; at that moment life seemed perfect. This is what makes it all bearable, he thought. Food and warmth, and a woman to provide all that. It would not be the same without them, of course, they were the ones who provided the material comforts. Men could and did cook as well, but there was that indefinable quality that woman provided that no man could approach.

"Do you realize how important you are, Raneid?" he said teasingly. "I suppose you do--where would

civilization be without women to civilize it? Think of the power of women--we couldn't exist out here without you."

"Don't make her conceited, Cal," Arne was smiling. "She already knows her own worth, let me tell you. In Norway, the women, they know it even more than here. They rule the men, the farms, everything. Raneid learned that from her mother. It's just a good thing there are no women close by--Raneid would have them all defying their husbands."

"The men, too, are different in Norway," Raneid put in. "There, they listen to their wives. Here it is the men who hold the power, and the women who must obey."

"Well, you don't pay any attention to that, Ran," Arne said, but a new note had entered his voice, and Cal thought it time to change the direction of the conversation.

"What I really meant was how important women are in the west. Men explore and adventure, but civilization doesn't really begin until the women come. They are the ones who first tame the men, and then tame the land. Men alone can't do it. That is why I suppose, I'm leaving. I don't have a wife to provide all this," he waved his hand at the table and the hanging on the wall, "We humans need to be comfortable and cozy, and only women can provide

that. Just as animals need their snug burrow, we need ours, and someone to make it snug."

Raneid had been listening intently, her chin propped in her hands, her blue eyes gathering the failing light from the window. "And women, what do they need?"

"They need a burrow to make snug, and a man to provide the materials to make it so," Arne put in. "And to make children for them."

"That does for the physical comforts," Raneid retorted, "but women need other things too. We have more--soul I suppose you might call it--and that is just as important as the animal, physical side. We need something to make that happy too."

"And what satisfies that?" Cal asked seriously. He felt they were coming close to something important, and he did not want to miss it.

"What satisfies that?" Raneid repeated slowly. "Who knows? It is different with some women, I am sure . . . but my mother always said that women need thoughts and ideas to occupy their minds, just as much as men do, and as for their souls, maybe that is just the need for companionship, friends, someone to share their troubles with, another woman, for men do not understand women's troubles like another woman. Men don't need other men as much as women need other women."

"You are speaking for yourself, Raneid." Arne said soberly. "Perhaps there are women who can live alone, who are adventurous and sufficient unto their selves like men."

"But are men, entirely so, Arne?" Cal interrupted. I was just saying the reason I am leaving is because I don't have someone to live with me, so I do need someone close to share my life."

"Yes, but men are content with a wife--they don't need other men except occasionally . . . while women feel this need for other women . . . I don't understand it." Arne drained his cup.

Raneid fetched the coffee pot and again refilled all their cups. "What you're saying, then," Arne went on, to Raneid, "is that Man can be content with just a wife to keep him company, but Woman needs more than just a husband."

"Maybe--I don't know . . . women are different . . . I cannot speak for them all," Raneid faltered now that she was so near the truth, Cal thought. Perhaps if he weren't here, she might have discovered what she really meant, or perhaps they might not have discussed it at all. "I only know, that women need friends, women friends, more than men need men friends, perhaps. I don't know why this is, or if it is only I . . . women are perhaps more

social creatures than men. Men fulfill a different role in our lives, as necessary as the other, but we cannot exist without both."

"Huh," Arne grunted. "You think too much. It's a mistake to give women too much time to think. They must be kept too busy to think . . . raising children, taking care of their man and their home . . . my mother never worried about her soul."

"Your mother always had women friends, neighbors, to come visit her for her social life," Raneid retorted angrily. "And church, and market day in town. She had all that, so she never missed it. As for ideas and things to occupy her mind, some women don't care about that, I suppose. She didn't, but I do."

"My mother was happy because she wasn't taught all those dangerous notions that your mother learned in those fancy schools, and the big city," Arne was becoming angry too, Cal saw. "Women shouldn't be educated. See what it does to them." He appealed to Cal.

"My mother's education does good to a lot of people. And she is happy too, despite being educated. You used to think it wonderful, Arne, that I could speak English and read and discuss ideas with you. But since we came here, you no longer care about that. You want to confine me to my burrow and think of nothing else."

"I only dislike your thinking when it makes you discontented and unhappy, Ran. Thinking does not do much good here. It is hard physical work that counts now. Later there will be time for ideas and reading and thinking again . . . and people to satisfy that social soul . . . but now, don't you see, Ran, now at first it is hard to do both."

It was true, Cal thought, against his will. Arne was as right in his way as Raneid was in hers. But Arne's way was cold logic, and he didn't have a chance against Raneid's instinctive urges. For it was instinctive, he felt, and something Arne, being so heartily a man, would not, and indeed, could not, ever understand.

"You are such a self-sufficient person, Arne," Cal put in carefully. "It must be hard for you to understand how lonely people get. I understand Raneid's feeling about people . . . some people need them more than others, and Raneid and I, I think, are like that. You are content with yourself and Raneid, but most people, you see, are not as strong as you. It is the reason why people live in towns instead of scattered out all over the place. They need each other."

"I suppose you are right," Arne said somewhat grudgingly, it seemed to Cal. "But anyone can learn to stand being alone for awhile. Soon there will be neighbors

and towns, as there are in the rest of Dakota. That was wild country too at first, and now--remember the towns and villages we saw all along the way west, Raneid?"

Raneid said nothing more, but began to clear the table and put water on the stove for the dishes. While they had talked the blizzard had sucked all the remaining light from the sky, and it was dark in the room, and time to light the lamp. Outside the wind howled steadily around the corners of the house, and beat unceasingly against the window. For all the talk, nothing was changed, Cal thought, everything remained the same after all. What Raneid had been talking about was only the external reasons driving her from Arne. But how to explain or put into words what he instinctively felt she felt also--that it might be possible to live alone and lonely in a beautiful land, where tall sighing pines kept one company, or musical streams provided pleasant sound, where mountains screened from one's view that there was nothing beyond--that a soul that hungered for beauty might subsist in an ugly place with substitutes of friends or duty; but such a soul without either beauty or friends could not exist long in this ugly barren place. Impossible, of course, to explain all this to Arne, for he did not see the Gumbo as ugly. Cal remembered again the day they had arrived at the home-site, and Raneid, disbelieving, exclaiming, "But there's

nothing here!" And Arne in reply, "Yes, and it's all for us."

Their difficulties seemed impossible to reconcile, to Cal. If only, he thought, he was free to leave and let them work it out the best they could. . . if only . . . but of course he wasn't. His guilt weighing heavily upon his shoulders he pushed his chair back upon the uneven wooden floor and went to help Raneid with the dishes. Still, he must try once more, once more before he took Arne's wife from him. He owed him every chance to understand why he must do such a thing, to Arne, his friend. He would wait, and when the opportunity came, he would try again.

That opportunity did not come until the evening of the second day of the blizzard. They had spent much of the afternoon, during an infinitesimal lessening of the storm, trying to feed the sheep a little hay from the stacks in the hay corral. The wind and snow had resumed again after a short time, storming harder than before, and it became impossible to fork the hay against the wind without having it blown instantly from their forks. They retreated to the house and drank coffee, and Cal, seeing his chance, took it. They had been discussing Cal's impending departure, and Arne asked him when he was going. Earlier, he said, than he'd planned before; the first

break in the weather, which probably wouldn't come now until January, when usually they could count on a few days of milder weather. Then, turning casually to Raneid, he said, "Maybe that would be a good chance for you to have a visit with the Williamses. You could stay as long as you wanted, and one of the boys could ride back with you."

Raneid shot him an alarmed look, then her face brightened. She took a deep breath, then turned to Arne. "I would like to do that," she said. "It would be a change, and the only chance I'll get for a visit before spring."

Arne's look at Raneid was so incredulous that Cal felt instantly with him the impossibility of the whole thing; awkward with embarrassment he fumbled for his tobacco, certain now that Arne saw the whole plot. But Arne only flashed him a look of surprise for such an obviously stupid proposal.

"Really, Raneid," Arne said with forced patience. "How can you think of such a thing in your condition, and with the weather so uncertain. You know yourself, Cal," he said reproachfully, "how fast the weather can change. It would be foolishness for Raneid to go so far. I can't allow it."

"You can't allow it!" Raneid pushed herself up

from the table so abruptly that the chair fell loudly to the floor. "Arne, you . . . How dare you tell me what to do! . . . I have my own mind. It is for me to decide . . . I will." She rushed into the bedroom, the curtain, carried through with her, floating slowly down. They could hear the thud as she flung herself on the bed, and the sound of her sobbing, muffled by the pillow.

Arne glanced at Cal, his face, guilty, embarrassed, exasperated, looking younger than Cal had ever seen him. "Pardon, Cal," he said in a low voice. "Raneid is not herself. Always she has been moody, but this . . ." he shook his head.

Cal leaned forward and fixed Arne's eyes with his own. "Arne, Arne," he said softly. "Listen to me! Raneid should be home with her mother now, her family. She needs them. Let her go home. I will lend you the money--you can pay me back over years. I will take her myself to New York. We can leave tomorrow."

"Go home?" Arne's jaw dropped vacantly; he stared at Cal as if he could not collect his wits, believe what he heard.

"I know all about it," Cal said desperately. "Raneid is very unhappy . . . she mentioned a little of it to me, and I've seen for myself. It is wrong to make her stay here. I was wrong to urge you to come. Raneid

will never be happy here. Let her go home . . . perhaps she will change her mind after the baby comes, or perhaps you will find a better spot."

Arne dropped his fixed gaze to his coffee cup. His big hands, clasped upon the cup, slowly tightened until Cal saw the knuckles whiten, and the veins pop out blue under the red chapped skin. At last he raised his eyes, and looked Cal straight in the face, without a word. The bright blue of his eyes dimmed, as a strange hard light flooded over them, turning them almost neutral in color. "Cal . . ." even his voice sounded remote and strange. . . "We are friends. You have helped me so much I can never repay you. But I cannot accept this from you."

Cal knew he meant both the money and the advice, and he bowed his head before that stern look. "Raneid is my wife. You don't understand how we planned this for years; she knew it would be hard. It has unsettled her, having a baby so far from neighbors, but I have promised her she shall have Mrs. Williams when the time comes. And so she shall. But don't you see, if she goes home now she will never come back. It will be as bad for me as for her. And she is my wife. She is so willful, and used to having her own way, too much so, I might say. But she must learn. Don't think I am being cruel. It is for her own good, and I know Raneid. Soon she'll

understand this."

"I'm sorry, Arne. I only want to help you both."

The grayness had gone from Arne's eyes and his voice had the old affectionate tone in it when he spoke again.

"You are too good hearted, Cal, that is your trouble. Any woman can talk you around. It's a wonder to me you have escaped so far."

Cal knew by the bantering tone of his voice that the subject was irrevocably closed. Arne had told him plainly not to interfere and there was nothing further he could say. Arne was not a man one pleaded with. Cal felt more sympathy for Raneid then ever, yet he realized the justice of Arne's position. He knew from experience how moody women were . . . how they exaggerated things out of all proportion. But still . . . it was not a new thing with Raneid. He had seen her changing all summer under his eyes. To drown out the convulsive sounds of the sobs in the next room, he got noisily to his feet and poured himself and Arne another cup of coffee.

ELEVEN

In the next few weeks, Cal stayed away from the Mortensons. Possessed with an almost insane urge to be

gone, he went through his little house, through all the trunks and boxes, sorting things into piles and heaps, putting the things he most wanted to keep into the huge steamer trunk, bound with iron hoops, that he had carried all the way from Pennsylvania. Into it he packed the few books he carried with him everywhere, all the extra clothes that would not fit into his saddle bags, a few blankets, and odds and ends of personal possessions. Everything else he put aside for the Mortensons. He did this in a queer state of dividedness--one side of him pretending that all was as before--that he would simply ride away and leave them these things to make their lives more comfortable. In this mood he was happy and peaceful, filled with the content at the thought of leaving, and good spirits at making Raneid's and Arne's life more comfortable.

At other times he would wake from this trance, and looking at the neatly folded blankets, the pile of books and magazines he meant to leave Raneid, wonder at himself. He knew as surely as he ever knew anything, that Raneid would leave with him, and who would read the books then? Still he kept up the pretense--it made the time more bearable, for otherwise how could he keep himself from sneaking off some moonlit night without her? It would solve everything, and he thought of it more than

once. For weeks he had had his saddlebags carefully packed with what he would need on the trip to Pierre where he would sell the horses and take the train for Chicago. It would be so easy--it almost was, one bright clear night just before Christmas. It had been a clear day with little wind, for the Gumbo, at least, and the night was clear with an early moon. I'll do it now, he thought, filled with such energy that he ate a cold supper, impatient to delay another minute, meanwhile composing in his mind a letter to Raneid and Arne.

"Dear Neighbors," he would say, "This is sudden, but the weather has turned so fine for traveling, that I have decided to go at once. Not wanting to wake you, this will be my goodbye for present . . ." He could not finish it and swearing, he stacked his plate and cup on the shelf without bothering to wash them. Might as well have some more coffee, he thought, and pulled the filled pot to the hottest part of the stove. His eyes fell on the blanket wrapped bundle leaning against the wall. It was his Christmas present to Raneid, along with some of the books he was leaving. He had found the mirror in Belle Fourche on his and Arne's fall trip, and had carried it carefully home, wrapped in an old quilt Mrs. Peterson had given him. Arne had laughed at him for his extravagance, telling him the blue beads

which were his present were much easier to carry. And of course they were, but he wanted Raneid to be reminded of how beautiful she was. Even then, it had seemed to him, she was in danger of forgetting. Somehow it had seemed important at the time.

Under the pretext of packing, he had seen the Mortensons only once since the blizzard. However, he was to spend Christmas Eve with them, and Raneid had made him promise to come early. "It is when we celebrate our Christmas, you know, Cal," she told him, and he had promised.

Early on the day of Christmas Eve, he closed his house and packed his saddle bags with all the gifts he could find for them both, and holding the large-blanket wrapped mirror carefully before him on the saddle horn, walked Jubal slowly through the snow. The mirror had been a nuisance to carry--he had had to lean it against the window ledge on the outside, then pick it up after he was in the saddle--and Jubal snorted and walled her eyes in mock terror. He had not planned on what he would do when he had to dismount with it, so when he reached the Mortensons the best he could do was shout at the door until Arne heard him and came out, shouting boisterously, "Gledelig jul." He was in good spirits; all his huge vitality spilling into the cold air. Cal

shouted back as cheerfully as he could "Gledelig jul!"

The kitchen was very warm, and filled with the mingled smells of food, coal burning, and Arne's male sweat, all sharp and distinguishable to Cal after the cold air. Raneid turned from the stove to greet him; she was stirring something in a pot with a long wooden spoon, and her face was flushed with the heat. She was wearing a dress of homespun blue that he had never seen before, with a low round neck, and her black hair was braided and wound high on her head. A blue ribbon the color of the dress was braided in with her hair. Cal felt admiration and surprise flush hot into his eyes, and automatically bowed, kissing the hand Raneid held out to him. This was not the scared girl he had last comforted, but the cool, possessed young lady of the immigrant train, and baffled, he stumbled over the Norwegian greeting, and turned away to hang up his coat and hat.

Arne went out while it was still light to attend to his chores; the sheep had already trailed home from where they had been grazing, and wanted watering; the three inside the house could hear their loud bleating as they gathered around the watering holes Arne had chopped into the ice of the spring. Now he took his ax and went out to break the newly formed ice layer, and Cal and

Raneid were left alone, Arne having refused any offers of help.

Raneid was setting the table with a white linen cloth, embroidered with designs worked in bright yarns of blue and yellow. The edge too, had a border of blue yarn, the color, Cal realized, of Raneid's dress. Sitting in Arne's chair on the other side of the room, Cal watched her. The low sunlight slanted in the window behind her, catching the edges of her blue dress, and picking up the blues in the table cloth, all accented by the bright yellow, and balanced perfectly by the oval of her white face, her hands, holding the silver, contrasted with the high-piled black hair. Except for the crude log-framed window in the background, it might have been a painting by Reynolds of an elegant society lady. Cal felt a violent deep homesickness; a longing for all the grace and elegance of a life he had thought he had almost forgotten.

He realized Raneid was looking at him, waiting for him to speak. "There you are, civilizing again," he said lightly.

"It's pretty, isn't it," she said abstractly, smoothing the cloth, as she laid down the last knife. "I made it years ago--oh, when I was fifteen, I think--the first one of my chest." She stopped abruptly, then

said bluntly, "Cal, I must leave with you. How can we plan it?"

Cal glanced instinctively, uneasily, at the door, and rose from his chair. They faced each other across the brilliant table. Raneid's eyes were dark and secretive, the light behind her catching only the outer tips of her lashes, and glossing the sides of her hair with white light. The light was not bright, yet Cal felt exposed, knowing that what he thought showed too clearly in his eyes.

"He won't be back for awhile," Raneid had followed his glance. "It will be the last chance we have."

Cal wavered before that positive force. He had not realized how strongly he had hoped she might change her mind, yet at the same time he felt a small upleap of joy flame beneath the heavy feeling of dread.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I have thought about it constantly. You saw how Arne was. He'll never let me go, even to the Williams'. I will have to go secretly. Once we could have talked of it; he would let me decide what is best for myself. But not now. He is a different man, harder, somehow; he won't listen to me."

"It will be hard on Arne," he said cautiously.

"Oh God, I know that. You don't know, how hard

it is, will be, for me to leave him. Because I love him so much, and you don't understand how I can love him and leave him but I do. He is strong enough, you know that, Cal. If I leave him, I'm hoping he will realize that I can't live here, and he will find another place. He can do it, if he wants to. You said yourself there are other places he can go. But I can't live here, either. He'll have to decide between us. There'll be the child. He wants sons. He'll come to me."

Cal could not answer the plea in Raneid's voice. It seemed to him that Arne was immovable from the Gumbo-- he was a man who had found his natural element. But, as Raneid said, if he had changed since coming here, he might yet change again. Anyway she was decided, and for the moment he had no choice.

"Well, then, Raneid," he said as calmly and naturally as he could, "I plan on leaving the first fairly warm, still day. If there is too much wind it is hard on the horses, and on us. Then, too, Arne will have the sheep out farther. You must persuade him to leave Freya with you, and have your saddlebags packed, only what you can carry in them. Everything else you must leave. You must bring some food too, although we should take only a day to reach the Williams. We'll stay there overnight, then leave for Pierre the next

morning."

"I will write a letter to Arne, explaining everything, and leave it for him. I don't think he will follow. When he sees that I am in earnest, he will have too much pride to come after us. Besides, there are only the team horses."

"That's so," Cal felt relieved. One would not expect Arne to have so little pride he would come chasing after an errant wife, but as Cal had learned, Arne did not always do the expected, normal thing. "We will leave this week, the first good day."

When Arne came in from his chores, the table was set, Cal was smoking his pipe, and deeply engrossed in a book and Raneid was busy at the stove. Arne, with a deep sigh of contentment, removed his outdoor things, and stuck his frosty mustache into Raneid's ear. The scream and kiss she gave him in return sounded so forced, that Cal hid his face behind his book in embarrassment but Arne, apparently oblivious, only laughed.

It was a Christmas Eve unlike any other Cal had spent, either at home or on the Gumbo. Here he had largely ignored it, spending it with the sheep, as Tommie usually went home for a few days with his family at that time. He would cook an especially good meal,

perhaps, and open a bottle of brandy to drink after dinner. This Christmas Eve would have seemed ideal to him only two months ago, a perfect pioneer Christmas; now knowing what seethed beneath Raneid's gay exterior, he could only wonder at the duplicity of women. It made him, in fact, a little uneasy. Was he more used, than rescuing, a lady in distress? He could not sort the complexities out, for always interfering with a reasonable solution was the look of naked grief on Raneid's face as she stood by the table. After he had drunk enough brandy it no longer seemed so important. He could think about it tomorrow.

For supper there was pickled herring, in place of Lutefisk, boiled potatoes, applesauce, canned tomatoes cooked with bread, and for dessert "rullespolse" rice pudding--and black coffee with brandy, Cal's contribution. It was a fascinating combination of tradition and necessity and it was delicious. Both Arne and Cal helped wipe the dishes for Raneid; she was as excited as a child, or pretended to be, about opening her presents.

Arne had found a scraggly Chokecherry bush in some corner of the river, and this Raneid had installed in a blue enameled pot filled with earth, which she had dug from the corner of the porch where it had not yet frozen. The bare twigs were decorated with bright

pieces of yarn and cloth and figures cut from newspaper. The presents, wrapped in cloth and newspaper, were piled underneath. Cal though he had never seen anything so bravely pathetic.

"In Norway, you know, Cal," Raneid said, seeing him glance at the little tree, and perhaps guessing his thoughts, "We use pine boughs and fir, to decorate the whole house for Christmas. Oh, it smells so good! And a fir tree which the children always decorate with ornaments they make themselves--little wooden figures of horses and cows and elves all painted so prettily. And Father would look all fall for a Yule log grand enough to burn the whole time in the fireplace. You must not think that this is how Norwegians celebrate Christmas."

"What Raneid likes best about Christmas is the pagan part of it," Arne said to Cal.

"It does seem a shame that The Christians had to spoil a lot of the lovely sun worship," Raneid said thoughtfully. "After all, they might have picked another time, and left that part of it alone. Imagine how much closer people felt to nature when they had a part in controlling it. To think of the feeling of power they must have had when they thought their dancing was bringing back the sun! Now we are made to feel sinful when we

enjoy the Christmas festivities instead of dwelling on the religious aspects of it, as the churches would have us do."

"How you can be such a pagan, coming from your family, I'll never know," Arne said.

"Mother is religious as anybody, it's true, but she respects the beliefs of others," Raneid said indignantly, "And Father too. We were never made to feel we must believe as they did, if we didn't want to."

Cal had been listening to the conversation, his head turning from one to the other like a fascinated bird watching a swaying rattler, he thought. He thought of the sensation Raneid would cause in his mother's parlor with such remarks, and he smiled involuntarily.

"Now you are laughing at me, Cal."

"No, Raneid, not at all. I just have never known any women pagans, before. It's not customary, you know. Women don't go around admitting to such things, even if they think them, which I doubt."

"Women should think for themselves, as well as men. Nobody would be surprised if you or Arne said such things. But women can't, or think they can't."

"Not that again, Raneid, please. You have two men under your rule, so you don't need to convert us. How about a song first, then we'll open the presents."

Arne rose from his chair, and handed Raneid her guitar which was leaning in the corner behind the tree. Cal refilled the brandy glasses and he and Arne toasted each other and Raneid as she tuned her instrument.

"Det kimer nu til-julefest," Arne sang in his fine, loud baritone, "The Happy Christmas comes once more," and he and Raneid finished the song in Norwegian. Then Cal had to learn the words to "I am so glad each Christmas Eve," and then they three all sang together, "Jeg er saa glad huer julekaeld."

"That's enough for now," Raneid said, laying the guitar aside. We will have more singing later. I want a present, please."

"Yours, first, Cal," Arne handed the blanket wrapped package to Cal, who gave it to Raneid. She exclaimed at the size of it, the heaviness, and her delight in the ornate, gold-framed mirror, when she unwound the blanket from it, was abundant and unfeigned. She propped it against the wall, and Arne said he would put a peg up for it in the morning. Then Cal opened his presents; a tin of choice Norwegian pipe tobacco that Arne had brought with him from Norway, and a blue knit scarf and cap from Raneid. For Arne Cal had found a fir lined pair of gloves in his trunk, and a harmonica he had never learned to play. Raneid's present to Arne

was a shirt made from the same blue homespun as her dress, sewn with meticulous stitches, and laced up the front like a sailor's blouse. Then Arne gave Raneid his gift, having saved it for the last. When he fastened the string of blue beads about her throat, he told Cal to hold the mirror, and Cal, looking down into the mirror, saw their two faces, side by side and in startling contrast, reflected in the slightly wavy surface. The blue of the beads was the same blue as the dress, Raneid's blue, Arne called it, and reflected the darker blue of her eyes. She seemed embarrassed at her own beauty, and after a quick look, to please Arne, turned away. Arne did not see the quick shine of tears in her eyes, as Cal did, and seemed quite happy with the kiss Raneid gave him.

Cal never remembered exactly what happened the rest of that Christmas Eve. He knew they had sung some more songs--he could remember Arne playing on his harmonica . . . and Raneid's clear voice singing some mournful folk tune, but the intimate details and emotional feelings were lost forever under a haze of brandy. He woke up the next morning wrapped in the buffalo skin rug he had given the Mortensons, in front of the cold stove as he had awakened many other such mornings. But as he built a fire in the stove, the rug

still around him for warmth, and looked out on the cold gray day, he knew this was not as those other mornings had been. This part of his life was over, had ended for him at the table with Raneid's pleading words that he take her away. Somehow he felt more regret than he ever had before. This leave taking would be different from any other, for no other reason than that he had never run off with someone else's wife, or run off with a woman he loved. It degraded him somehow to think of himself in that light. Since the Mortensons had come to share his life on the Gumbo, it had seemed almost possible, at least for a little while. He had thought almost that someday he too might settle down and work for something he loved like Arne. But life was not that way; what had seemed love was not, or love under another guise; paradise could not exist here and for a time he had almost forgotten that.

TWELVE

All the rest of that long winter, the rest of her life, Raneid remembered the journey and what had happened at the Williamses almost as if it were a dream, a nightmare that recurred and shifted, faded and reformed each time into new and terrifying dimensions. Sometimes it was the long ride that seemed the most terrible; the

long hours when the cold wind numbed her fingers and toes and Cal would not let her stop, and only rarely, when she could stand it no longer, let her walk until she was warm again; the sun that shone pitilessly all day, hard and cold and bright, glancing off the white snow, the only relief the occasional brown edge of a burnout showing through the snow like a dead snake, or the golden-brown spiky clumps of grass poking through the shallow snow. Sometimes she forgot the ride itself, and remembered only the lamplit room, with Sally's shadow dancing like a witch's on the wall, as she poked and poked at the fire in the stove, her nightcap bobbing on her head, and the unexpected, sheer terror of Arne looming in the doorway--no, not unexpected, for somehow she had known he would come. Sometimes all she could think of was the endless ride home in the silent, accusing dawn, with Odin one-eye rising above the horizon, watching her malevolently. And then sometimes the most terrible of all seemed the day, the hour, the minute she was living.

Again, faintly surprised, she wondered why she did not go insane, and at other times she knew she was, that no human being could exist, day after day, like this. But that feeling came less often as the winter wore away, for she managed, day by day, to pull herself

into a smaller and smaller space, until at last it seemed she existed only in the very kernel of her being, in the center of her womb, where the unborn child flickered with life. It seemed almost as if she had died, but her body lived on, caring insensately and automatically for that seed of life kicking within her. She could feel nothing but that painless fluttering. Nothing touched her physically or mentally. One day she burned her hand badly on the stove, and did not even notice it until Arne's cry of horror that evening when he caught sight of it. It festered badly for days, but she used it without caring. Somehow it healed. Arne's words, too, flew at her without wounding or stirring her in any way. She heard and comprehended what he said, but it made no difference to her now. He pleaded with her to forgive him, forget what happened, coaxed her to play the guitar, and sang to her when she would not; once in the night she woke to hear his labored weeping; she listened curiously, until at last it stopped and he slept again.

Day followed day. They were all alike. She would not stir out of the house unless Arne made her come to the barn with him, to help gather the eggs, or to look at the sheep. He insisted she exercise a little every day; sometimes she heard him, and would do as he

said, meekly wrapping her coat around her and swathing her head in scarves, she followed in his footsteps around the barnyard, and sometimes even a little way down the lane to the river. She never went far, and although Freya whickered to her from her stall, and held out her nose to be petted, Raneid did not ride again. Other days she laid on the bed all day and heard nothing. Arne would give up trying to coax her after a while, and would cook himself something, always keeping some back for her.

They talked like polite strangers, but Raneid talked less and less. Her voice, when she said something, sounded strange to her ears, and her tongue had trouble forming the words. She used the wrong ones in Norwegian, and remembered nothing of English. Arne spoke to her only in Norwegian, telling her each night how the sheep were, and what had happened to them, and of Oskar, and Freya, and the two cows. One of the cows had stopped milking but the other should last for a month or two, so Raneid would have milk for the baby. They talked of names for the child--or rather Arne named his favorite ones, and Raneid agreed or dissented or said nothing. It did not matter. A name would come when it was needed, and she wondered why Arne thought it important.

Arne was patient with her because she was pregnant, she knew. It was the cause of everything to him, and he believed all would return to normal after the child came. Sometimes she believed this too, but then she would remember how she felt in those months before her pregnancy; how even on the train she had felt that first infinitesimal shading of horror and despair come over her, as swift and fleeting as the cloud shadows that raced over the prairie faster than the train itself; how gradually the shadow had darkened and deepened, trapping her inextricably in its smothering folds, seeping into her very flesh, until all was the same color, inside and out. She remembered the fantasies she had woven as a child; how Loki, the evil one, would trap her in one of his disguises of evil, and how Freya, the beautiful one, the good, would rescue her in her cat-driven chariot. Freya had never failed her then, but Freya would never come near such an ugly place; she who was so beautiful, and who loved all that was beautiful. Raneid read and reread her Eddas, as she had always done in times of trouble, but this time she could find nothing that gave her comfort, only the certainty that Frigg, who knows the destiny of all mankind, knew what was to happen to her and Arne; Frigg, and the Norns, who decree man's fate.

Arne's patience was strained to breaking with her each day. Raneid saw this, and in her heart understood and even sympathized with him, but she had no will of her own. The tiny quiver of sympathy could not struggle through the great mass of indifference which surrounded it--that unfeeling hulk which was her body. Only rarely did anything pass through her armor. One evening she sat, reading as usual, the Younger Edda, when she felt Arne's eyes, like a heavy weight, upon her. They very seldom talked in the evenings now. He had been braiding some rope halters, and the unfinished one lay hooked over his knee, forgotten. He spoke before she could look away, and the desperation in his voice made her reluctantly, close the book, still keeping her finger in place. "You feel better now, don't you Ran?" Raneid knew, unwillingly, what he wanted her to say, but she only nodded. "I mean, after the baby comes, everything will be as it used to be, Ran? Remember, only last winter, how we used to plan where we'd be, and what we'd be doing, there in front of the fire, after they all were asleep?"

Raneid glanced involuntarily at the empty wall where a fireplace should be, and Arne went on hastily. "You'll be busy with the baby, Raneid. There'll be so much to do. If all goes well, we can hire Tommie to

herd sheep next fall and you and the baby can go along on the trip to town. And in a few years . . ."

He stopped, not wanting to mention a trip home, but Raneid understood. Despite herself, she could not ignore the pleading in his voice. She knew she must reassure him, not for his sake, but for her own. She could not allow him to upset her now; to force her to feel and think again. Instinctively she knew that if she once felt fully the horror of their situation she could not bear it. She would begin screaming and never stop. So she said, in the most normal tone she had used for weeks, "You must be patient, Arne. Mother always said pregnancy changes women. Everything will be all right, when the spring comes . . ."

She could not go on. Spring would never come. But Arne, misunderstanding, and with tears of gratitude in his eyes, flung the rope halter off his knee, and pulled her gently onto his lap. For a long time he held her, rocking her, cradling her like a child in his arms, crooning to her, while she stared at the flickering shadows the lamp cast on the log wall, seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

The winter that had started so ominously with the November blizzard was not, however, one of those record ones that kill sheep and cattle by the hundreds.

Although it snowed more than usual, it did not snow enough to completely cover the grass, and the wind, blowing unceasingly as it always does, managed to blow enough away for the sheep to eat. And it did not rain or sleet on top of the snow to make a crust which neither wind nor sheep's hoofs could penetrate. By Gumbo standards it was an average winter. Arne bore it stoically enough, Raneid thought. It did not seem to dismay him to spend long days in the cold wind, directing a band of hungry sheep to those areas bare enough to graze, and coming in to feed the cows and horses, chickens and pigs, and milk the cow. Raneid did none of that now, both of them excusing her on grounds of her pregnancy. It terrified her to go outside, away from the shelter of the house. The wind, keening unrelentingly outside, seemed to continually presage some dreadful storm; it tore at her viciously when she went out, chilling her to the bone. The harsh glare of the sun on the almost unrelieved snow seared her eyes. Arne grew used to it, but Raneid's eyes would water and tears run down her cheeks until she could not see. She stayed indoors almost all the time, losing her healthy summer tan and becoming pale and wan.

One day she saw herself in Cal's gold-gilted mirror, hanging still where Arne had hung it on Christmas

morning. She passed it every day, but this day she saw herself clearly for the first time in weeks. She was ugly, and she stopped, shocked out of her apathy for a moment. It was true. For the first time she saw her face as not beautiful. She looked at it with interest. The hair was as black as ever, the skin as smooth, but something subtle had changed in the blue of her eyes, an intensity of shade she had always seen there was gone, a light that had made her, until she had grown self-conscious about it, sometimes kiss her mirrored face with delight. She looked at this face with faint dislike, as someone she did not know, and would not want to know, and turned away. After that she avoided the mirror.

Another day, around the middle of March, Arne came in at his usual time with a bouquet of pussy-willows he had found on the willow tree by their swimming hole. "The pus pil are out, Raneid," he shouted jubilantly, handing them to her. "It won't be long till spring now," his voice so tender and full of meaning that Raneid dropped her eyes rubbing the gray velvet of the catkins against her face. For the first time she felt a faint stirring of panic. She had avoided thinking of the birth of the baby all winter, but now she felt suddenly how huge she had grown, how vigorously

the baby was kicking within her at that very moment. Not long now till he would force himself out of her. Terrifying images flashed against her closed lids, blurs of reds and purples . . . she felt faint. Arne, seeing her white face, held her up with his strong arm, and helped her to a chair.

"What is it, Raneid," he said, his voice rough with panic. "Are you . . . is it?"

"No, no, not yet," Raneid gasped out. "But it's only . . . only a month until the baby comes. You said the doctor would come," she said accusingly.

"Mrs. Williams will come the second week in April, she promised. And Tommie will fetch the doctor from Pierre. But don't frighten me like that. I thought the pains had started." He poured them both some coffee from the pot on the stove. "But don't worry, Ran, by that time, I'll be as good as a doctor myself. The first lamb came today. I hurried home to tell you. It is cold still. I'll have to keep them close in now."

It was the first time he had dared to joke in the old way since Christmas, and Raneid felt a smile start inside. Her face did not move, but something shifted, lightened for an instant within her. For an instant she felt a longing so intense tears started to her eyes--only to love him again in the old way. When

Arne turned to her with the cup of coffee she took it from him silently.

Two days later Tommie came to help with the lambing, as Arne had previously arranged. He was silent with them at first, and faintly hostile to Arne, and Raneid knew he had not forgiven them for Cal. But he seemed so real, so tangibly a part of the outside world, that she felt that queer painful stab of feeling flash through her again. She had not known she would be so glad to see anyone as she was to see the shy, awkward boy. It almost amused her to see how his eyes followed her, and how embarrassed he looked when she caught him staring at her ungainly figure. Poor boy! He hadn't expected to find her so changed.

The lambing forced her into the activity of the ranch again. Big and awkward as she was, she must help with the orphan lambs Arne and Tommie brought into her daily, for they were kept busy with the sheep. One of them had to be with the drop herd, the main bunch, and the other constantly keeping track of the newborn lambs and their mothers, moving them to smaller groups where the addled ewes, never the best of mothers, could keep track of their babies. But there were always those who simply would not, for one reason or another accept their lambs, despite all the tricks Tommie knew,

expert lamber that he was, and these were put under Raneid's care. Both cows were milking again, and it took all the milk they both produced to feed the hungry lambs four times a day. Strangely enough, Raneid did not mind the task. When feeding time came, she would warm the milk, pour it into the glass jugs fitted with pig intestine nipples that Arne had made, and carry them out into the sheep shed, where Arne had fenced off a corner for the "bum lambs" as Tommie called them. Toward the end of the lambing, there were fifteen of them, and they would all begin to bleat at once when they saw her coming, switching their little tails, and sticking their heads out between the bars. Raneid took them out in twos, putting them into another, smaller pen which opened into the first. They would kneel instinctively, as if she was their mother, and butt at the bottles with their eager mouths, crying plaintively when she took the nipple from their mouths.

Tommie managed to help her with several of the feedings each day, and she knew he spared her all he could. She seldom saw Arne during this period, except when he came in to eat a quick meal, and to sleep exhausted, for a few hours, until it was time to get up and make the nightly rounds, which he did once or twice a night. He would never allow Tommie to do this,

saying the boy needed his sleep, and he tried his best not to waken Raneid, but she almost always heard him as he fumbled out in the dark. With Arne out of the house so much, the tension eased; Raneid no longer felt his oppressive presence weighing on her. She was almost, mindlessly, content.

Sally Williams came, as she had promised, the second week of April, early in the second week, in fact. "Thought you might need help with the lambing," she panted, heaving herself out of the buckboard. "We've almost finished, and there's plenty there to do my work."

Despite Raneid's reserve, she was as glad to see the cheerful plump woman as she had been to see Tommie. It was good to have company in the house, to hear her prattle on about women business. Although she was slatternly, she was a good cook and worker--she would have done everything if Raneid had let her. She brought with her clothes she had made for the baby, plum preserves from the summer, and a packet of letters the mail courier had dropped off at their house. "He says that's as far as he's going, till there's more people here, but I told him good enough--you'll just have to come visit us, more often is all."

Raneid took her letters to the barn to read, away from Sally's prying eyes. Her mother and father

wrote and each of her brothers had added a note. They had received Raneid's letters from the fall, and theirs were full of cheerful counsel, mostly on her mother's part, advising her to work hard, so she would have no time not to be cheerful, assuring her she would soon grow used to the place; in every line their warm, anxious concern for her. Raneid wept as she read. There was no mention of her coming home. They expected her, as Arne did, to stay where her husband was. Even Mother . . . She read them all over again, absorbing eagerly all the details of the life she knew so well. Her cow, Songe, had calved . . . a fine bull calf. Father would send her the money for it when he sold the calves in the fall. Siri had had measles, but she was better now. Aase, her middle brother, Hans' wife, had had her child, a boy, an easy birth. He looked exactly like Hans . . . She put the letters aside for Arne to read later, along with the ones from his father and uncle.

Sally must see all the improvements Arne had made during the summer and winter, and Raneid walked about with her, feeling a reluctant, detached pride in her homestead, as she listened to Sally's valuable praise. She marveled at everything . . . the root cellar, the shed, the barn, the wonderful well. The Williams' were still hauling water from a spring near

their house, after five years. What a wonderful, clever man Arne was . . . how snug he had made it all. Her own poor Fred had two thumbs on every hand when it came to building. She was better herself at it.

In the midst of her chatter, she told Raneid about Cal. She had had a letter from him by the same mail that had brought Raneid's letters; he had spent the winter with his parents, while his leg mended, and was planning on leaving soon for Alaska. All letters could be sent to his parents' address, of course. Raneid said merely that she was glad he was all right, but she was grateful to Sally for her kindness. Neither of them mentioned the matter again.

Little by little, almost despite herself, Raneid felt life returning to her numbed body. She had thought she no longer cared for anything, but she could not help enjoying the bum lambs' dependence on her, the silky fringe of wool over their eyes, and their warm little mouths which nibbled at her wherever they could. She found herself replying almost cheerfully to Sally's chatter; listening for Arne's step on the porch. One morning she stood listening in the sunshine for five minutes while a meadowlark threw his joyous, pure notes into the sky not fifteen feet from her. When she at last returned to hanging the clothes on the line, her

cheeks were wet. It was painful; she could not bear too much, and she tried to think no farther ahead than each day demanded. Sally had assured her over and over that the young doctor from Belle Fourche, who had just set up a practice there, straight from medical school, had promised to come in plenty of time. He would be there by the next week, at least. Fred had himself ridden to Belle Fourche to talk to him. A nice young man he seemed, and handsome . . . the women were all mad about him, and he had many patients already. And a wife of course. Well, that didn't matter. He was a real find for a town out here, and closer, too, than the one from Pierre.

Raneid took out her mother's childbirth case from the dowry chest, and read her mother's instructions, written in Norwegian on the inside of the leather case, to Sally. Sally marveled at the sharp, silver scissors, the waxed linen thread, and the dried herb leaves for tea. She promised to follow the instructions exactly, although Raneid could see she was a little amused by it all. "All that soap and water . . . why, when Mrs. Anderson had her baby, there wasn't time for no washing. Easiest birth I ever saw." Raneid was persistent; her mother had always been meticulous about the washing. Sally promised, not at all insulted. It apparently did

not enter her head that Raneid was appalled at her carelessness. Raneid made Arne, too, promise to fill the wash boiler and keep it ready to heat.

Now that the time was almost upon her, Raneid took herself firmly in hand. She would not give way to the panic that sometimes invaded her; that she was helpless to control her destiny, she knew, but still she silently rebelled at her body. She was forced to bear this child whether she would or no. A woman should have control over her body at least. She was not a thing, an animal, a birth-convenience. Yet, inexorably, she was forced each day to bend to Nature's law. Well, bend she would, since she must, but she did not accept it. She would not blindly give birth like an animal; when the time came she would master the pain and thus regain control of herself. She saw the others marveling at her calmness. They did not know how she seethed within.

On a Friday night Raneid went to bed feeling nauseated, half-thinking it was the salt pork she had eaten for supper, but still giving Arne orders to fill the wash boiler. She saw Sally raise her eyebrows knowingly at Arne, and put out the clean sheets and nightgown she had ready. Her back had developed a sickening ache, but she slept quite soundly until she

heard Arne stirring about in the early dawn. There was just enough light to see his figure moving about, fumbling on his clothes. He was going out to look at the sheep, she knew, so she did not call to him. There would be plenty of time; first babies always took longer. She waited until Arne closed the door behind him, and the first pain had subsided; then cautiously got out of bed and dressed in her usual workday dress. She would not tell the others until she had to.

It did not take Sally long, however, to discover that she was in labor. "I thought so," she said with satisfaction, as Raneid, despite herself, gasped and grabbed the back of the chair as she was clearing the table after breakfast. She hurried out to the barn, and returned a few minutes later with Arne. Raneid mastered the panic she felt rising again as she saw the panic in Arne's face. This was something she had to do herself; she did not want him to interfere with her in any way.

"Just lift the boiler onto the stove, please, Arne," she said calmly. "And Sally can get the bed ready. It won't be for hours yet. Sally will hang out a white dishtowel on the door if we need you before evening." She did not listen to their protestations, and at last they did as she bade them, and she and Sally

were alone.

The pains went on all day, becoming more severe as the day went on, but not much closer together. Raneid read and knitted and talked a little to Sally, but trying mostly, with all the strength of will she could muster, to control the pains, to force her body to slow down the inevitable process, to wait until the doctor came. Beneath her calmness, the fear pricked at her with a thousand tiny needles. Fear of what was happening to her, fear of the coming pain, and how she would bear it, and then, bit by bit, fear of something else. "Sally," she finally said, when she could bear this terror no longer, "Sally, the baby hasn't moved all day. Is it all right, do you think?"

Sally bustled over and laid her hand on Raneid's bulging belly, moving it around firmly. "I can't feel it move either, but that doesn't mean anything, love. It's getting ready to be born, and has moved around some, that's all, to where you can't feel it. Don't worry about that none. You're having good pains now, ain't you? We want you in bed, now, before they get too close."

Raneid nodded. She had reached a new height of pain with the last contraction, a new dimension. Meekly she let Sally help her off with her clothes, wash her,

put on the new clean gown and help her into bed. The sun, which had been shining brightly all day, was slanting through the little window in the western wall, and Raneid knew that Arne and Tommie would be in soon. The ache in her back sickened her, and she asked Sally for some tea made from the leaves in her mother's case. She recognized the smell when Sally brought it to her, the same Mother had given her for earache when she was a child, and the time she had broken her arm, climbing on the rocks of the fjord. For awhile she slept, coming awake with the pains, and drifting back again. When she awoke fully, it was night, the lamp was lit, and Arne and Tommie were sitting at the table, eating. Seeing she was awake, Arne came to look at her. "All goes well, Raneid," he said in a low awkward tone, half question and half reassurance. She nodded. The pain in her back was so bad she could not move, and the pains were much closer together. She heard with surprise the moan that came from her own mouth when the pain forced it open.

She wanted to tell Arne not to look so horrified, that she could bear the pain, but her whole being was so concentrated on the mastery of that pain that she could not find the words to tell him. She didn't want him there. This was something she had to struggle with

herself, this pain, but she could do it. She knew she could, but each time the pain came again, and she marveled at its increased intensity. It could not be any worse, yet each time it was. This, this, this, was pain, and each time, she found that she had yet more to discover. Each time she mastered it anew. I can do it, she thought exultantly, I can do it, all by myself. And yet she heard her own voice groaning and groaning. She could not control that, but it did not matter. Arne's horrified face hovered around her, until Sally made him go away. Raneid tried to smile, to reassure him, but she was angry at him too. Didn't he see how hard she was working? No one could help her now, she had to do it alone. She no longer thought of the doctor, but in between the pains recited all the poems and songs she knew, to keep herself from screaming.

The pains went on for hours. She learned later that it was just midnight when the child was born. She was getting tired now, but she would not give in. As each new tide of pain rolled over her, she struggled again to the top, but it was necessary not only to survive, but to encompass it, contain it, bear it down again. She did it over and over, until at last the intensity of the pains ceased. They did not lessen, but the pain went no further. I've reached the end of pain, she thought in

wonder. There is nothing worse than this, and I've come through it all . . . I'm on the other side. "Sally, Sally," she called, "Get Arne, hurry."

They came in a rush, Arne bringing a gush of cool air with him, and the smell of sheep, Sally with her arms full of cloths. There came another surge of pain, and Raneid had just time to think, Oh I was wrong . . . there is something worse yet, and then her son was born, as the tide finally rolled her under.

When she came to herself again, a few minutes later, she knew at once that something was wrong. Arne was working frantically over something on the bed at her feet, Sally, half-turned to her, holding something, murmuring things Raneid could not hear. The pain had gone, but beyond that Raneid could feel nothing. "Tell me, the baby," she said loudly. Neither of them paid her any attention. Arne, down on his knees . . . what was he doing? She tried to sit up, but her body refused to respond. Oh what--what . . . Sally's plump hand pushing down again among the pillows, and Sally's voice saying softly in her ear. "The baby's dead, but you're all right love, go to sleep now," and she tried again to struggle up, but she was so tired . . . she would just sleep a little while, and then, when she woke up, everything would be all right.

But she remembered immediately when she woke up. The baby was dead, and she had to see Arne, tell him, explain how hard she'd tried . . . that it wasn't her fault. It was afternoon again; the house was still and quiet; it was raining outside. She could see it against the window pane. She was terribly hungry. Sally came over from the stove with a bowl of something hot in her hands. "I knew you'd wake up hungry," she said, beaming, and plumped up the pillows behind Raneid, lifted her up against them like a child and began to feed Raneid spoonfuls of the steaming broth. Raneid let her, for she saw it pleased Sally, although she felt so strong she could have sat up to the table. "Where's Arne, Sally?"

A quick shadow came over Sally's face. "He's off with the sheep. They had a lot of lambs yesterday, and it's keeping them busy. He'll be in soon, I reckon."

"Where's the . . . the baby?"

"Your mister wrapped him in the red quilt and he's going to make a little coffin for him . . . now, don't grieve, love. He was strangled by the cord, never lived at all."

"I knew it, I told you he hadn't moved . . ."

"Well, the Lord only knows. Your mister, now, he's taking on, but you'll have others, you had an

easy birth, and you're young and healthy. And your man did everything anybody could do. Nobody could have helped it."

The tears rolled down Raneid's cheeks. She had not cried for such a long time, but she had discovered during that long struggle, how much she wanted the child. For something to give to Arne . . . and a boy . . . how cruel, how cruel, she whispered to Sally in Norwegian, all that for nothing.

"Yes, yes, my dear," Sally wept with her, not understanding at all, but kind. "I know how it is . . . I've lost two, myself, and it's hard, I know it is. But the good Lord knows what he's doing. We can only trust."

"Not God, Loki . . . to punish me. He hates me, and Odin too. It's to punish me."

"God wouldn't take away a little baby for punishment, Raneid. Nonsense. It's an act of nature, that's all, but he's safe with God now." Foolish old woman. Nobody would understand but Arne; she must talk to Arne.

Arne did not come near her, not until the end of the day, with the sheep bleating outside, did he come. Sally had supper on the table, and the men sat down to eat. Arne came over in front of them all, and patted her hand, and talked to her gently, but she felt

underneath his terrible coldness. He blamed her too. He knew. He talked to her, but he said nothing the others could not hear. He slept on the floor that night, rolled up in the buffalo rug, so as not to bother her. She woke in the night, hearing him go out, and called to him. He came at once. "What is it, Raneid?"

"Could I have a drink of water, please?" she said plaintively, like a child. "I'm thirsty, and it's so hot."

Arne laid his big hand on her forehead. It felt cool and rough, and she pressed it against her eyes. "You are hot. Shall I wake Sally?"

"No, I'm all right, but Arne . . ." Sally stirred in her sleep, and Arne hushed her. "We'll talk in the morning. Don't wake the others."

She meant to get up the next day, but somehow she could not wake up. She tried and tried, but every-time she struggled to the surface, down she would go again, into the very depths of sleep, like a drowning swimmer. When she did finally come awake, she could see blue sky through the window, so it was day again. Sally was in her rocking chair, knitting.

"I'd like a bath," Raneid said dreamily, and Sally was beside her at once. "Of course you can have

a bath. Why child, you're soaked. Do you feel like sitting up a bit?" She sat down on the bed beside Raneid, and supported her with her arm. "Don't try to get up now, love. You should stay in bed two weeks at least."

"I felt so well yesterday. It's just that it's so hot in here, don't you think?"

"I'll open the door a bit, then, after you've had your bath, if you're still warm." She brought Raneid some of the mutton stew she had saved for her, but Raneid's appetite of the day before had gone. The bath felt good, though, and so did the clean gown and sheets. Sally brushed her hair, and tied it with yarn into two loose plaits, and held the mirror up for her to see. She was beautiful again. She had thought, before, that it did not matter, but still, she was glad now. She was herself again. If only she weren't so tired.

They were whispering in the kitchen, talking about her. Sometimes the words faded to nothing, and then again boomed so loud and clear she could hear every word. Sally . . . "Should be better by now . . . such an easy birth, never saw any easier." A strange voice, mumbling . . . a man's saying, "Childbed fever" in a weary way.

She opened her eyes. A strange male face was looking down on her, a young man's compassionate, bearded face. "Raneid, this is Dr. Anderson, from Belle Fourche, he's just come." Arne's voice floated to her from somewhere, speaking in Norwegian.

"How do you do, Doctor." Raneid smiled. Why was he here now? It was too late, the baby was dead.

"I know, I'm sorry, Mrs. Mortenson." Had she said the words aloud after all? His hand on her forehead, her wrist. "Some water, Mrs. Williams, and these powders in it."

The voices floated away. She smelled fresh ground coffee. "She's healthy, young . . . yes, of course, I'll stay. I would have been here sooner, but I lost my way. Your son found me wandering around out there."

What was he talking about? She had no son. Someone, Arne, was holding a glass to her lips. It was dark now, his shadow loomed on the wall. Only his shadow. She was so hot, the water was so bitter. The pain, but not the terrible pain, was back.

Mother, her cool hand on Raneid's cheek, smoothing her hair behind her ear. There, there, Raneid, you will be all right now. Sing, Mother, so the pain will go away. . . "Jer er sass glad huer jukekaeld" her mother's

voice, thin in her ears. "Jer er Sass . . . "What is she singing?" Something cool against her face and breast. Mother kept going away, into that swirling red darkness. And her eyes, what was the matter with her eyes? She couldn't keep them open, or was it she couldn't shut them? It was all the same, and she couldn't tell.

A lark was singing, clear and shrill outside. She lay listening to it. That pure sound . . . she went up and up with it, climbed and climbed. Perfect. How could such a little bird do that? It is my bird, she thought. He is singing to me. Because I'm going to die. She opened her eyes, and saw Arne sitting beside her bed in her little rocking chair. She smiled at him, and watched his tired, whiskery face flush with love. Why hadn't he shaved this morning?

"Arne." He took her hand in his. She smelled, for the first time, her own body. The stench of death, that always came with the fever. Death eating at her from the inside out.

"You're better, Raneid." Arne's joyful voice.

"Yes, better. Arne, our baby, where is he?"

"I'm making him a little coffin, in the barn, Raneid."

"Don't bury him yet, Arne . . . wait a little.

I wanted him so, Arne, you know I did, for you. You know that, don't you Arne?"

"Yes, Ran, I know. We both did. Nothing could be done. Even the doctor said so. Don't talk, Raneid. You must rest."

"I will, Arne, but listen . . . I was wrong Arne, to go, but you were wrong, too, not to let me. And Cal, no listen, Arne, please . . . he only wanted to help me. There was nothing . . . I only loved you, Arne, all my life. If only we could try again."

"Raneid, du vesle, little one, we will . . . we will both try. You shall go to your mother the next time."

"And when I'm better, we will look for land elsewhere, Arne . . ."

"We will talk of that when you're better. Sleep, now."

The Norns had decided her fate before she was born, the Sagas said, but she could alter it still, if only she tried hard enough. But now it was too late, and they had won, after all. Or had she won? She drifted away again, held only by Arne's clasp on her hand, and finally that too loosened and she drifted free. Once, she opened her eyes to see them all grouped above the bed, watching her, but when she blinked they were gone. She

could hear the sound of thunder rumbling far off, Thor in his war chariot. But no, she saw in surprise, it was Freya, in her golden chariot, and the rumbling was the growling of the cats. The sun was shining on her golden hair, which floated about her in a cloud of fire. It was Freya, the good, the beautiful, come to rescue her at last. She lifted her arms to her, calling, but there was no need, for Freya was smiling upon her like a summer sun. "Come," she said in Mother's voice, and Raneid rose of herself into the air to meet that outstretched hand. But just before she reached it, she saw with horror that the face was her own face, and then she was enveloped in the soft dark cloud of Freya's hair, dark as her own.

END OF PART I